

# **THE ONE WHO KNOCKS: THE HERO AS VILLAIN IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISED NARRATIVES**

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*Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

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## RESUMO

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: herói, anti-herói, protagonista, *storytelling* televisivo, revolução criativa, paradigma do herói, vilão.

Esta dissertação pretende analisar o *storytelling* televisivo contemporâneo norte-americano, considerando os eventos históricos e políticos que conduziram a uma aparente revolução criativa no final do século XX. Esta evolução na programação televisiva de qualidade ficou conhecida como a terceira “Golden Age” da televisão americana, cujo centro passou a estar ocupado por um novo tipo de protagonista, sugerindo uma mudança no arquétipo do herói. Através de exemplos significativos de algumas séries de televisão, tais como *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Dexter* (2006-2013) e *House of Cards* (2013-presente), e analisando as características dos vilões, *serial killers*, *cowboys* e *gangsters*, assim como a sua relevância na criação da figura do herói nas narrativas contemporâneas, esta dissertação tentará demonstrar que heróis, anti-heróis e vilões partilham traços cada vez mais comuns e diferenças cada vez mais ténues. A personagem de Walter White, protagonista da série *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), simultaneamente herói e vilão numa América desencantada, foi o exemplo escolhido para aprofundar o que torna este tipo de personagem tão complexa e cativante. Através desta personagem, cuja jornada reflecte a criação de um vilão, um dos principais objectivos desta dissertação é o de demonstrar o modo como as fronteiras do paradigma do herói foram sendo redefinidas para englobar medos, inquietações e realidades contemporâneas.

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## **ABSTRACT**

**KEYWORDS:** hero, anti-hero, protagonist, television storytelling, creative revolution, hero paradigm, villain.

This dissertation intends to analyse the shift in North-American television storytelling by considering the historical and political events that laid the groundwork for a creative revolution at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This boom in quality television programming became known as the third “Golden Age” of American television, whose centre became populated by a new type of protagonist, suggesting a shift in the archetype of the hero. Through significant examples of American television series, such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Dexter* (2006-2013) and *House of Cards* (2013-present), and analysing the characteristics of villains, serial killers, cowboys and gangsters as well as their significance in the creation of the hero figure in contemporary narratives, this dissertation will attempt to show how heroes, anti-heroes and villains all share ever more common traits and ever more tenuous differences. The protagonist Walter White from the series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), both hero and villain in a disenchanted America, was the example chosen to delve into what makes this type of character so enticing and complex. Focusing on this protagonist, whose journey reflects the making of a villain, one of the main objectives of this dissertation will be to demonstrate how the boundaries of the hero paradigm have been redefined to encompass contemporary fears, concerns and realities.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1. Television: In the Driver's Seat of a Revolution.....	4
Chapter 2. Enter the Men.....	24
2. 1. <i>The Sopranos</i> : Coming in at the End .....	24
2. 2. <i>The Wire</i> : This Is America. ....	35
2. 3. <i>Dexter</i> : Born in Blood.....	39
2. 4. <i>House of Cards</i> : Achilles Is Only as Strong as His Heel .....	50
Chapter 3. <i>Breaking Bad</i> : Growth, Decay, Transformation. ....	54
Conclusion .....	77
Bibliography .....	80
Filmography .....	82

## INTRODUCTION

By the end of the twentieth century there is an apparent shift in television storytelling, bringing the inner fantasies of the human psyche into the proscenium of the ego. Long gone are the days of leaving the *obscene* (= off stage) images behind the curtain to spare the audience a shocking experience. Violence and sex have always been present in storytelling in varying degrees, but the *collective fantasy state* that allows the proliferation of these images and stories with dubious moral standards is the result of a revolution in moral and social attitudes regarding the way stories are told.

Examples such as D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) in literature and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in cinema have pushed the boundaries of acceptance and proved groundbreaking in the establishment of what seems to be a new moral view. Today, television has taken centre stage in redefining the breaking of taboos and collective fears. Not only has there been a technological revolution allowing the medium to develop in a way that would reach people's homes in a massified way, but also television storytelling has become more thought-provoking. Writing for the small screen in a long narrative form has become an enticing way to develop character arcs and keep playing with audience expectations.

The beginning of the twenty first century witnessed a boom in quality television production in what became known as the third "Golden Age" of American television, signalling a creative revolution. Premium cable companies, such as HBO, AMC, Showtime and FX have been carrying the banner of this qualitative leap. Because of their being broadcasted on paid cable television and their very specific production values, this new era brought about series aimed at relatively narrow target audiences. Nevertheless, the controversial themes explored and the niches granting them the epithet of cult series established these innovative narratives as determinant in the shaping of new paradigms. Shows such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Dexter* (2006-2013), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) or *House of Cards* (2013-present) paved the way for a whole new way of telling stories. Common to all of these series (and many others) is the type of protagonist. Extremely egotistical, volatile, obsessive and violent men (there are some exceptions, but the great majority



are men), often without any loveable sides to their characters or any redemptive qualities, deeply flawed and immoral, they flaunt their own codes of conduct in what can better be described as a sociopathy consequential of the bleak, hopeless and unstable reality of the world today.

Detached, narcissistic and even violent protagonists are not new. They have been occupying the centre stage of cinema screens since the aftermath of the Second World War. The new element in contemporary televised narratives is the shift in the archetype of the hero as well as the revolution in television storytelling: the role of heroes today has been taken over by villains. Psychopaths and serial killers infiltrate television screens forcing audiences to rethink human nature and its role in the shaping of current values and morals. Protagonists such as Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, unimaginably cruel but also painfully human, redefine the boundaries of the hero paradigm.

Thus, one of the main objectives of this dissertation will be to demonstrate the paradigm shift that has taken place in recent television narratives. The character of Walter White, both hero and villain in a disenchanted America, is the example chosen to delve into what makes this type of character so enticing and complex, through the analysis of the characteristics of both heroes and villains and their significance in the shaping of the protagonist in modern narratives.

This dissertation will be divided into three parts. The first chapter will deal with the historical context that showed fertile to the development of a certain realistic approach to television storytelling and how the technological development of the medium itself contributed to an increase in quality. At the same time, the establishment of a new type of protagonist proved crucial to the shift in the hero paradigm, drawing upon both the anti-hero and the villain for its distinguishing features. HBO's *Oz* spearheaded this narrative revolution by introducing a whole gamut of criminals the viewer had to learn to love. The second chapter explores in detail four television series as illustrative of this new man of the millennium, the sociopathic villain protagonist. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Dexter* and *House of Cards* all share the disruptive qualities that seem to belong to the fabric of a disenchanted contemporary America, proudly flaunting new protagonists that, unlike the heroes of the past, are now heralds of frustration. The third and final chapter focuses specifically

on *Breaking Bad*'s main character Walter White and how he has become one of television's most adored and feared villains. Through his character's transformation "from Mr Chips into Scarface" (*Breaking Bad*'s creator Vince Gilligan, quoted in San Juan, 2013: 11), Walt becomes the paramount example of an unprecedented metamorphosis in televised narratives thus far. With this case in mind, it is safe to assume that villainy seems to have taken over modern narratives.

Drawing upon the protagonists chosen – Tony Soprano, Dexter Morgan, Frank Underwood and Walter White –, the role of the hero today seems to be undergoing a significant shift, not only by thwarting viewers' expectations but also by deconstructing storytelling archetypes. Since the end of the twentieth century, the viewer has been witnessing the failure of the American Dream on television, as countless examples of tormented characters have been piling up on the creative mound of unredeemed protagonists.

Where once the Dream expressed a desire to stake one's claim in the wilderness and to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps, frontier, and industry soon gave way to suburban sprawl and corporations; and as the world grew smaller and more competitive, the homestead was reduced to a house surrounded by a fence that seemed to grow taller and more imposing from one decade to the next. (DeFino, 2014: 144)

DeFino here is referring to *The Sopranos*, but the pettiness of this suburban experience is quite widespread in that it demonstrates contemporary society's personal isolation. Heroes today are confined by greedy desires of excess, apparently lacking in heroic qualities and overall concerns about mankind. The journey they undertake into the cave of their inner selves is already tainted by failure. Nevertheless, in this era of individualistic excess, contemporary heroes and villains act as invaluable mirrors of an austere and disenchanting reality.

## CHAPTER 1. Television: In the Driver's Seat of a Revolution

*He who fights with monsters should be careful  
lest he thereby become a monster.  
And when thou gaze long time into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.*  
in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

In the opening credits of Zack Snyder's film *Watchmen* (2009), under Bob Dylan's words for "The Times They Are A-Changin'", superheroes are seen as passing fancies in a new world order where their own existence is a thing of the past. The film is an adaptation of the comic book series from 1985, created by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, which suggests a different historical outcome for America. In this alternate history, the United States have won the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon is still the president, while superheroes have been outlawed and the few remaining ones are either government agents or working on their own, outside the law.

In real life, after the victory of the United States in the Second World War, the nation thrived as the most powerful country in the world, proving its supremacy by defeating the incarnate evil embodied by Hitler and the Nazis. However, the Vietnam War brought about a collective trauma state and led to the decline of American confidence in the resolution of international conflicts. The escalation of US involvement was followed by the escalation of social and political tension at home. Dealing with a new type of guerrilla warfare, different from the one fought in Europe, American soldiers encountered an enemy that was elusive, hard to identify and invisible at times, and soon the military offensive became one general mission to search and destroy<sup>1</sup>. At home, anti-war protests demanded justification for the American presence in Vietnam, a war many Americans felt was not their own. However, behind the United States intervention on foreign soil was a subjacent duty to bring freedom and justice to all oppressed people living under communist regimes, a political system that Americans felt threatened the very foundations of democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> It is true that the enemy in the Pacific War theatre already shared some of the characteristics of the Viet Cong. Nevertheless, this military offensive was brought about as a direct response to the attack on Pearl Harbour, and in the end Americans were clearly the victorious ones, even if at the cost of using the atom bomb. (Martins, 2009)

Given such a definition of the world, and the moralistic rhetoric that accompanied it, distinctions between countries and issues became blurred, and it was America's "moral" obligation to defend "freedom" anywhere it was threatened, regardless of how dictatorial, tyrannical, or repressive the regimes on "our" side acted. The result was a massive distortion of reality. Vietnam became Munich; Ho Chi Minh became Hitler; and intelligent disengagement became appeasement. (Chafe, 2007: 287)

The depictions of American soldiers on film suggest the ambivalence of this position. They were at once heroes and victims, as well as villains, agents of terror. For them, the war continued at home, for American society had no place for them upon their return. Those beaten, disenchanted and unstable heroes, such as Willard from *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Private 'Joker' Davis from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Michael from *The Deer Hunter* (1978) or even John Rambo from *First Blood* (1982) are emotionally committed to a fantasy. "You Americans fight for the biggest nothing in history" says Hubert de Marais in *Apocalypse Now*, advocating that the Vietnam War was not theirs to fight.

In the fictional world, "(...) the costumed *super* hero represented a new mythology which tapped into a war-weary cultures [sic] desire for protection, unassailable power and unambiguous moral superiority (...)" (Alsford, 2006: 34) with superheroes being created as hopeful devices dedicated to protecting the public, upholding a strict moral code which placed them on the side of justice and honour. As examples, some of the most famous superheroes were created at critical times: Superman in 1933, Batman in 1939 and Captain America in 1941.

As countries such as the United States of America and Great Britain assign themselves the role of the world's police force and the custodians of liberty and freedom – this in part as a result of their roles in the Second World War – it becomes easy for their cultures as a whole to cast themselves in the role of the hero, the one who has an almost transcendental, and indeed parental, perspective and responsibility for the rest of the world. In this respect the character of Superman, clothed in the red white and blue, could well be seen as an expression of the American psyche. (Alsford, 2006: 92)

However, the story behind *Watchmen* reflects on the role of heroes while self-reflecting on a society (1985's) infatuated with power and extremely self-involved,

attempting to regain the confidence and authority it seemed to have lost since the Vietnam War. Characteristic of the Reagan years, this forced optimism also recuperated the rhetoric of heroes and villains and the crusade against the “evil empire”<sup>2</sup> of the Soviet Union.

The country was in trouble, he [Reagan] believed, let down by leaders too prone to worry about nagging dilemmas, too obsessed with limits rather than possibilities. And so the voters “rounded up a posse, swore in this old sheriff, and sent us riding into town.” In those words, Ronald Reagan described how he defined his presidential role – to rescue America, restore confidence, and sweep away all the doubters and skeptics who insisted on talking about “problems.” (Chafe, 2007: 450)

The use of Old West symbols reinforced the idea of a hero, a vigilante seeking justice for the American people, protecting their interests, pushing them forward into a new era of prosperity and greatness, promising to rid their world of all evil and wrongdoing. Reagan’s manichaeistic approach prompted Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons to conceive a universe of hubristic superheroes who, similarly to the ‘80s political leaders, seemed to carelessly juggle the fate of a world on the brink of nuclear warfare.

Exposing the human side of these superheroes evidenced their realistic qualities and turned them into complex characters so unlike most of their counterparts of the decade, real-life cartoonish muscular types, such as Dutch from *Predator* (1987) or Terminator from *The Terminator* film (1984), John Rambo from the sequels to *First Blood* (1985 and 1988) or John McClane from the *Die Hard* series (1988 and 1990), to name only a few. At the same time, the ‘80s introduced the artificial intelligence discussion with the boom in technology development raising the question of humanity and empathy in robotic beings and, therefore, in human beings themselves. The advent of the blockbuster, side by side with the rise of globalisation, allowed the proliferation of action films, entertaining spectacular and escapist formulas that created a renewed American hero akin to the superheroes of the past. More often than not, two-dimensional characters that sought revenge, survival, justice and salvation. Those manly, brutish and violent men, although with hearts in the right

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan’s speech to the *National Association of Evangelicals* in Orlando, Florida, in 1983. [http://www.reaganfoundation.org/bw\\_detail.aspx?p=LMB4YGHF2&lm=berlinwall&args\\_a=cms&args\\_b=74&argsb=N&tx=1770](http://www.reaganfoundation.org/bw_detail.aspx?p=LMB4YGHF2&lm=berlinwall&args_a=cms&args_b=74&argsb=N&tx=1770) (accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016)

place, were vigilantes following the Cold War rhetoric, soldiers carrying the banner of justice, at whatever cost. Protagonists such as Rick Deckard from *Blade Runner* (1982), Alex Murphy from *RoboCop* (1987) or Douglas Quaid from *Total Recall* (1990) inhabit futuristic dystopian realities that pose a response to the social and political unrest of a world witnessing large scale destruction by human hands. The inadequacy of the larger than life quality of superheroes altered the face of fiction for subsequent decades. Because different times call for different types of heroes, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mirroring the bleak, hopeless and unstable reality of the world, the new heroes who came to life were often devoid of the until then expected heroic qualities.

The 1990s in the United States, although being a decade of unprecedented economic prosperity and unquestionable optimism, was also a time marked by particularly violent events that introduced a new kind of warfare at home, within the limits of the nation. The arrival of reality TV and the proliferation of video cameras for personal use caused reality and fiction to overlap in the same decade which saw the violation of privacy confirm George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) prophetic message: "Big Brother is Watching You". Suddenly, the notions of privacy and freedom of speech started sharing a very tenuous border. Whatever fell under the scrutiny of the video camera took on the contours of the truth, however staged or manipulated that truth might have been, similarly to the *fly on the wall* and *cinéma vérité* documentaries of the 1960s. When a nation witnessed, for the first time in history, to a live broadcast war in real time of what became the first Gulf War (as well as the events in Somalia and Rwanda), the reality of what actually was (and what became from then on) American military intervention on international soil acquired a whole new and much more "real" dimension. Despite the elusiveness and even fabrication of these images in the depiction of the truth, their realism was taken at face value.

At home, the situation was somewhat similar. In 1992, in Los Angeles, the police violently beat up Rodney King while this event was captured on camera. This indelible proof would be at the origin of the LA riots and place a nation on the brink of another civil war. A few years later, in 1995, the American people witnessed the most publicised criminal trial in the history of the country, gripping millions of viewers while

they witnessed in real time what *Time Magazine* later dubbed “an American tragedy”<sup>3</sup>. O.J. Simpson, a cherished figure of American football, revealed his dark side on camera<sup>4</sup> while the racial tension the country was going through accentuated the importance of the trial. Prior to that, viewers had stood glued to national television watching the live broadcast of Simpson’s police pursuit for almost four hours.

Following the social and racial unrest in the United States after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the Waco siege (1993), prompting anti-government feelings, the World Trade Center (1993) and Oklahoma City (1995) bombings, which introduced terrorist attacks to the world (not only from the outside, by Muslim radicals in WTC, but also from within, by Americans themselves in Oklahoma), the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado (1999), a shocking event that opened the door to the discussion about firearms possession, and the Clinton presidency (1993-2001), tainted by perjury and sexual scandal, Americans’ faith in institutions was shattered. Clinton’s moral failings brought about an era of scepticism that only grew out of proportion during the years that followed with the Bush administration. After 9/11 villains and enemies hid in plain sight and were not so easily identifiable as before. The collective trauma caused first by the Vietnam War and later by 9/11 left a whole nation on its knees, forced to confront a type of violence it could not cope with. The collapse of the World Trade Center seemed an impossible and unbelievable feat. Capitalism, the Western world, but above all the United States, were hit at their very core. There was a general feeling of numbness before the horror, a struggle to understand a different kind of terror brought about by an invisible enemy, a treacherous attacker, much like the Japanese had done on Pearl Harbour, bringing the war to their front door, instilling a terror that feeds off and is fed by the proliferation of images and news pieces giving it a newfound authority and infecting society with a fear impossible to control or predict. The realisation that the world was facing such an unprecedented direct attack at its Western core should have propelled change, but disorientation and astonishment was what followed, both in the ‘70s and after 2001.

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<sup>3</sup> *Time Magazine*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1994 edition.

<sup>4</sup> There were 121 video cameras in the court room and the trial was broadcasted on 19 TV channels, an unprecedented media coverage by then.

Since the Vietnam War, which was the first most televised war ever, the proliferation of images acted as the denouncement of a corrupt system, whether in military abuse, police authority or in institutional terms. The home invasion these images provoked also contributed to the banalisation of a certain kind of violence – how to distinguish what is suitable for the viewer to watch, what demands viewer discretion and what is absolutely gratuitous and therefore harmful for the audience. When the world saw, helpless and prostrate with shock, the World Trade Center collapse on 11 September 2001, the images themselves were not new, they were a visual reminder of old tired Hollywood tricks and special effects. Most importantly, the audience of the '90s had already been educated to accept live television as an unquestionable slice of reality and truth. An audience caught between the Cold War and the War on Terror, their critical judgment was still impaired by an era of television excess, where images were accepted as depictions of truth. (NGC, 2014)

The closing of the millennium, similarly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fin de siècle* feelings of pessimism and decadence evidenced a preoccupation with the future after a decade of civil unrest and technological frenzy. The dismal realisation that the same cycles of violence and chaos kept being enacted as the new millennium approached had a deep effect on individual consciousness with feelings of disenchantment and loss, but ultimately it brought about a creative revolution. Contradicting Gil Scott-Heron's words<sup>5</sup>, this revolution was televised.

The television series of the new millennium expose the decadence of the American Dream, the failure and inadequacy of hopes and dreams in a present devoid of such illusions. The men at the forefront of these narratives are heralds of frustration and insanity, of psychic illness and emotional disconnection. These characters have either given up or are on the verge of collapse, their inner monsters awoken to the grim realities of contemporaneity. Their strength lies in demonstrations of power and cruelty as they exert their attraction through clever emotionless tirades of self-centredness and self-awareness, using the audience as confidants of their twisted but often accurate views on the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Gil Scott-Heron's song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1970).



And given the narrative complexity, nuance, and irresolution of these series, it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that viewers are drawn simply to the sex, violence, and swearing. Perhaps what we are witnessing is the emergence, or at least representation of a new set of normative values in America. (DeFino, 2014: 139)

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Technological advance by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed for the development of television itself. Screens became wider and thinner, image became clearer and sharper, access to quality content became easier, the medium itself became essential in everyday life. The arrival of DVDs and the common use of the internet changed the way television content was experienced, granting the viewer control over *what*, *when* and *how* to watch. In addition, the advent of cable networks provided an unprecedented range of choice in complex television programming with premium cable companies such as HBO, AMC, Showtime and FX rivalling for their quality content. The fragmentation of the audience made possible by the arrival of cable television turned out to be favourable for the expansion of specific target audiences and subsequent niche markets.

By the end of the '90s, according to both Brett Martin and Christina Kallas, American television came into what became known as its third "Golden Age", defined by its revolutionary narratives and high production values unlike any seen so far in the medium. Thus, the three "Golden Ages" of American television began in the 1950s with sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* (1951-1960) and *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), epithets of the first "Golden Age"; in the 1980s and early 1990s with series like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and *The X-Files* (1993–present)<sup>6</sup>, signalling the second; and finally the third, at the end of the millennium and early 2000s, with *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) – the latter series having "at least two things in common: they are aimed at relatively narrow target audiences and they have developed a highly sophisticated narrative form that seems to borrow as well as inform cinematic storytelling." (Kallas, 2014: 3) This third "Golden Age" came into existence due to premium cable networks that started producing

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<sup>6</sup> The series aired nine seasons from 1993 to 2002, having returned for a tenth season in 2016.

original programming, thus opening the door to new products. With HBO taking the lead others followed, seizing the opportunity to narratively expand on the concept first proposed by a company whose tagline was “It’s not TV, it’s HBO”:

(...) HBO has effectively reframed our sense of what constitutes “quality” television – in drama as in comedy – by shaking up the conventions of genre, expanding the boundaries of content and form, and injecting an unprecedented sense of fatalism into American television. (DeFino, 2014: 129-30)

Curiously, HBO started by broadcasting comedy specials and reality shows. Although comedy is what distinguished it at first and still does today, it is relevant noticing that reality shows gave way to series with an extremely realistic approach, replacing real life people with fictional characters.

The freedom allowed by cable networks set them free from the demands of advertising and commercial breaks, while at the same time allowing the showrunner to be more thought-provoking and daring in what he wanted to show or tell. The morality scales of network television broadcasters, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, among others, is much more uptight and conventional when it comes to flawed or corrupt characters, especially leading ones. These protagonists of the new millennium that seldom learn from their unforgivable mistakes are characteristic of cable networks, such as HBO in the lead, but also AMC, Showtime and FX.

The enticing aspects of television series in what concerns storytelling are evident: these allow longer stories, extended character arcs to be developed throughout whole seasons and, most importantly, they create a bond with the viewer by entering directly into their living room. This apparent home invasion is the first step into the questioning and/or acceptance of new moral codes and rules of behaviour as represented by fiction. Surprisingly, fiction seems to fall much more under the scrutiny of morals than reality TV. Apparently, what passes as truth still holds an *in your face* quality that fiction has not yet conquered in its graphic content.

As a premium service, HBO took creative advantage of its lack of content restrictions, injecting liberal doses of profanity, sex, and violence into these series. Though obscenity standards had begun shifting in American television

long before *Oz*'s first prison rape scene aired in 1997, HBO transformed the way we think about the uses of "graphic" content. (DeFino, 2014: 113)

Until particularly premium cable channels such as those mentioned above, violence, sex and swear words were kept to a minimum from television audiences, although series such as ABC's *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) had already cracked that wall. For many people, TV began offering serious and thoughtful content as opposed to the special effects driven plots of '90s Hollywood cinema. The cinematic possibilities of these new series due to higher production values and the growing interest in telling long-arc stories made writers and cinematographers migrate from cinema to television to explore new creative worlds. Alongside these, actors and directors also took advantage of this creative shift, besides contributing to the attraction of viewers. Greater opportunities in the production and formal aspects of series encouraged a different structure in terms of content. In premium cable networks series have typically twelve or thirteen episodes per season (as opposed to the twenty two or twenty four format of network television series) which favour greater financial and creative risk-taking, in turn resulting in thoughtful and dramatic content that has been compared by many to the serialised novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Previous TV dramas tended to tell simple, easily digestible stories that began and ended within the space of an hour, featuring clear good guys and bad guys, that played on your emotions but rarely taxed your brain or your moral compass. (Sepinwall, 2013: 8)

Unable to use real swear words, for example, network television series invoked the falsehood of television, while others such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *The Wire* (2002-2008) or *Deadwood* (2004-2006) brought a new type of realism onto TV screens. The obligation of appealing to a mass audience has always prevented network television from taking the creative risks their cable counterparts have done.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only technological progress seemed to offer the final push for the creation of new narratives, but these were also encouraged by an era when common goals and values seemed hard to find and heroes and villains

became harder to tell apart. These narratives influenced and were influenced by a need to see reality represented in a way that would speak to the audience, a piece of fiction that would not lie, that would talk about terrorism, the economic crisis, the war on drugs, police brutality, among other issues, but above all, about the ordinary lives of ordinary people. Stories became more compelling the less they seemed to answer to viewer expectations, in the sense that having their expectations thwarted would keep the viewers alert and interested, as DeFino argues: “They seem immediately familiar and ‘real’ to us, not just because they look right and characters act and react in ways we might, but because they are built upon a familiar set of values.” (2014: 138) While themes and narrative tropes were familiar, characters, particularly their villainous protagonists, were not.

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The profound cynicism and scepticism in which American society became immersed in the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened the door for the creation of a Janus-faced type of character. Kind and fatherly on the one hand, merciless and cruel on the other. His values are those of family, but he is never altruistic enough to sacrifice for their well-being. He upholds a code of honour, yet he explodes in fits of anger whenever things get out of his control. He is painfully and unmistakably human, struggling to find his place in the world, to make sense of his life and to understand his failures. Certainly, these characteristics do not make up an extraordinary personality, but a rather common man.

However, this common man is no longer the disenchanting man or the existentialist nihilistic man of the post-World War II era, an anti-hero that, confronted with the crushing fear of global annihilation, carried with him the overwhelming certainty that all life is meaningless. The common man of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a man obsessed with himself. Realising he is equally useful and useless to society he is a new man for the millennium, both a hero and a villain. Tony Soprano’s feeling that he “came in at the end” (*The Sopranos*, 1:01 “The Sopranos”)<sup>7</sup> expresses this idea of

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<sup>7</sup> From this point forward, series and their respective seasons will be thus referenced.

hopelessness before an unrelenting world machine that does not care about the insignificance of the human being and his tribulations. Ultimately, this new man is above all concerned about his own identity. The difference between this and other villainous characters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that these new protagonists are struggling with their identity, with the presence or absence of humanity in their personalities. The blurring lines between what makes a hero and a villain make room for complex characters who are a bit of both, undeniably villains for their twisted psychological traits, sense of self and often borderline personalities, as well as a dubious morality, but at the centre of the narrative, taking the protagonist's place. Thus, the paradigm of the hero seems to be undergoing a significant shift.

The journey undertaken by this type of protagonist is one that traverses the deformities of the soul. Despite the fact that he still searches for some kind of redemption, it becomes clear that he seldom finds it. Thus, the centre of modern narratives today belongs to the misfits and the outcasts. Condemned by his character and, to a certain extent, rejected by society, this new man embarks on an inner journey through his fears and anxieties, his perversions and anguishes, while at the same time searching for his authenticity and place in the world.

The hero – who usually wins – cannot exist without an opponent in one form or other. The villain embodies this opposition and can present a fascinating complex of characteristics. Villainy is integral in narratives that reflect the innermost fears of the human psyche, and is often a significant part of the construction of loss, whether it is loss of innocence, loss of loved ones, loss of power, or loss of self and/or identity. The conflict that in the end produces and constructs the hero is the battle to overcome the antagonist or opposition, and resolve the transgressions that disrupt harmony, order, etc. (Fahraeus and Çamoğlu, 2011: vii)

Until recently, even if there might be some nuances, the hero has been identified by his good deeds and the villain, his nemesis, by his pure evil nature. One acts in opposition to the other. One exists because the other does too. However, the classic narrative structure that allows this type of duality to exist has been challenged due to the dissatisfaction with how much these narratives depart from reality. It is no longer sufficient to see good triumph and evil be punished, because this moralist view is frowned upon by audiences today as a naïve perspective of contemporary society.

When dealing with heroes and villains it must be reinforced that these represent archetypal examples that are recurring in storytelling with more or less common features, which invariably differ from author to author. Notwithstanding, there are unavoidable collective traits that help building a common ground so these archetypes can be construed and discussed as clearly as possible.

A hero is identified as the protagonist in a narrative. Also, he usually gathers a certain amount of qualities that allow describing his character as heroic: “A Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others, like a shepherd who will sacrifice to protect and serve his flock. At the root the idea of Hero is connected with self-sacrifice.” (Vogler, 1998: 35) With a strong sense of ethical duty, the hero will embark on a journey to completion. In Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), in which he advances his theory of the monomythic structure of the hero’s journey,<sup>8</sup> comprising different stages that culminate in a victorious return of the hero, the world of the hero is shown to be imbalanced, so he must separate from it in order to return victorious after having overcome his ordeals. Only after becoming conqueror and master of two worlds can the hero restore balance to the world he left in the first place. This structure follows the model present in the rites of passage – separation, initiation, return – a triad also present in the three-act structure of storytelling, first described in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

To counterbalance the hero’s existence, an opposing force, the villain, is represented by the archetype of the shadow, “(...) the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something.” (Vogler, 1998: 71) This shadow may be within the hero or embodied by another figure. Storytelling is all about conflict and, ultimately, resolution.

The hero confronts the otherness of the world and seeks to overcome it, often via a willingness to set aside their unique powers thus rendering themselves vulnerable. By contrast, the villain revels in the power to control, to manipulate and ultimately to create a world in their own image. (Alsford, 2006: 39)

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<sup>8</sup> The hero’s journey, as simplified by Christopher Vogler, comprises the subsequent stages: “Ordinary World; Call to Adventure; Refusal; Meeting with the Mentor; Crossing the Threshold; Test, Allies, Enemies; Approach to Inmost Cave; Ordeal; Reward (Seizing the Sword); The Road Back; Resurrection; and finally, Return with the Elixir” (1998: 212).

The hero should be a conflicted character, either battling his own demons or external forces, or both, as in the case of many superheroes, such as Superman (his alter ego being that of an ordinary man, Clark Kent, his mask to blend in a world where he is an alien being, nevertheless a world which he fights for) or Batman (the Dark Knight, a vigilante who fights crime as atonement for his parents' murder when he was a child, a troubled figure who seeks revenge through violence and torture).

There are also several types of heroes, according to Christopher Vogler: willing and unwilling heroes, group-oriented and loner heroes, anti-heroes, tragic heroes and catalyst heroes. The relevant terms here are anti-hero and tragic hero, the latter a variation on the former:

These are flawed Heroes who never overcome their inner demons and are brought down and destroyed by them. They may be charming, they may have admirable qualities, but the flaw wins out in the end. Some tragic Anti-heroes are not so admirable, but we watch their downfall with fascination because 'there, but for the grace of God, go I.' (Vogler, 1998: 42)

Although all villain protagonists are anti-heroes and an anti-hero may have villainous characteristics, not all anti-heroes are villain protagonists. Many protagonists of post-Second World War novels and films are anti-heroes, such as, in novels, Meursault from Albert Camus *L'Étranger* (1942), Dean Moriarty from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Billy Pilgrim from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), or, in films, Jim Stark from *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Wyatt aka "Captain America" from *Easy Rider* (1969) or Harry Callahan from *Dirty Harry* (1971), protagonists that are characterised by their unconventional heroic qualities and cynicism. "Simply stated, an anti-Hero is not the opposite of a Hero, but a specialized kind of Hero, one who may be an outlaw or a villain from the point of view of society, but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy." (Vogler, 1998: 41)

Anti-heroes who are villains are of a different breed. They are dark figures, deeply disturbed and evil at their very core. Some villainous protagonists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century include Norman Bates from *Psycho* (1960), Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (1976), Tony Montana from *Scarface* (1983), Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Patrick Bateman from *American*

*Psycho* (2000) or Jean-Baptiste Grenouille from *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2006), among others. What all these characters have in common is that they are all vicious killers. They are, nevertheless, protagonists which tease the viewer to partake in their violent behaviour and side with their remorseless demeanour. If it is true that evil and evil deeds are part of everyday life it is also true that violent behaviour is a matter of choice, or at least society is indoctrinated to think this way. Killers, because they cross the imaginary line that separates good from evil, have the power to both seduce and repel, for they are creatures who dwell upon both realms as conquerors of freedom through violence. Equally attractive and repulsive in the collective mind, these men (for they are usually men) indulge in violent behaviour as a philosophy, a way of life. The audience knows, or rather feels that their actions are “wrong”, but the allure is in the confidence they demonstrate and in their quasi-heroic qualities, which allow them to uphold a code of honour that ultimately will distinguish them as survivors.

Television series, such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Dexter* (2006-2013), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) or *House of Cards* (2013-present), among others, have deeply disturbed men as protagonists in a permanent tension with society and their own wicked nature. At the centre of these narratives are men whose relationship with others and themselves is hindered by severe moral flaws and a dubious morality based on a readjusting of the frontier between *good* and *evil*, *right* and *wrong*, a frontier that in the modern world seems to have lost all sense and purpose. However, the attractive quality of these characters has been dictating the rules of this new approach to televised narratives with a type of structure that has increasingly been favouring deviant behaviours.

These were characters whom, conventional wisdom had once insisted, Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human. They played a seductive game with the viewer, daring them to emotionally invest in, even root for, even love, a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy (*Mad Men* and *Big Love*) to vampirism and serial murder (*True Blood* and *Dexter*). (Martin, 2013: 4-5)



Concerned with his essence and his identity, this protagonist begins his inner journey with the help of the viewer's complicity and empathy. The viewer does not condemn him because he identifies with him at some point, with both his cruelty and his shortcomings.

More than an anti-hero or a villain, this new protagonist is a sociopath. Men like Tony Soprano, Dexter Morgan, Walter White or Frank Underwood are centripetal forces, attracting the viewer's attention as sucking black holes. All of them share an attraction for power and for the possibility of exerting some kind of control, either over others or over their own lives. These are characters that may be compared to the great heroes of Greek tragedies, such as Oedipus, Medea or Prometheus, or of Shakespearean tragedies, like the characters of Hamlet and Macbeth, who were condemned by their hubris. However, at the cathartic end of these tragedies, their protagonists were punished for having defied the gods. The same cannot be said about Tony Soprano or Dexter Morgan. Their plans might have been completely frustrated, but their end is not punishment. Nor is the purpose of these "modern tragedies" to moralise the audience. David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*, talking about the end of the series, stated: "I didn't want to show that crime paid and I didn't want to show that crime didn't pay."<sup>9</sup> Thus, these men do get away with murder.

The appeal of these characters seems to be the fact that their actions interest more for their anthropological than mimetic quality. The viewer becomes interested in the *how* and *why* of their actions, delving deeper into the understanding of human nature. Audiences are not easily shocked because their present reality is equally hostile and cruel, neither are they easily satisfied for their desires seem to be always out of reach for the ordinary man. However, by following week after week how these characters exert their power over the world around them, how they manage to succeed when everything points to their failure and how their goal is still a happy ending, even if such a thing does not exist, either in fiction or in real life, the viewer becomes complicit of their ordeals and triumphs.

If there is any hope it is that these protagonists find some kind of authenticity or peace in their lives, a meaning to their actions, and that this small victory might act as solace to those who closely follow their stories. "The fallen anti-hero can be

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<sup>9</sup> Commentary included in the special features of *The Sopranos* DVD edition.

sympathetic, but he must fail. That's why we so desperately want him to succeed." (Koepsell and Arp, 2013: VIII) The viewer places himself inevitably alongside the monster, not only because he is the protagonist, but because he feels some sort of solidarity and empathy towards him. Long gone are the days of characters like Raskolnikov, from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), who, consumed with guilt, are forced to confess their crimes. The arrogance and hubris of these new characters does not allow them to confess, unless that confession brings them admiration or recognition. They are the product of a cynical and individualistic society, no longer worried about achieving any universal truths for the good of mankind. Motives are now selfish and it is every man for himself.

## §

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first of these groundbreaking series<sup>10</sup> was set inside an American prison. *Oz* (1997-2003), created by Tom Fontana for HBO, took place in a fictional prison, Oswald Maximum Security Correctional Facility. In real life, the purpose of such places is the rehabilitation and reintegration of the individual into society. Having paid for his crimes and corrected himself, he humbly takes his place in the society he had been forced to abandon. Nevertheless, during the six seasons of *Oz* no one is redeemed or rehabilitated.

AUGUSTUS HILL: *Oz*. That's the name on the street for the Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary. *Oz* is retro. *Oz* is retribution. You wanna punish a man? Separate him from his family, separate him from himself, cage him up with his own kind. *Oz* is hard times doing hard time. (*Oz*, 1:01 "The Routine")

Therefore, *Oz* suggests a bleak vision of reality with a set of characters that are beyond redemption by tackling a series of controversial subjects: religion, homosexuality, racism, infanticide, rape, drugs, among others, and thus going beyond the mere rendering of violence, as Sepinwall points out:

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<sup>10</sup> As stated above, these series did not spontaneously come into being. Television is permanently reinventing itself since it aired its first programme. However, the choice to highlight *Oz* as groundbreaking serves to distinguish this series from others that came before.

The violence was inherent to the setting, but Fontana had higher aims. He wanted viewers to confront the dehumanizing nature of the prison experience, but also use these criminals as proxies to talk about race, addiction, sexuality, religion, elder care and any other hot-button issue he had on his mind. (2013: 26-27)

Although that is undoubtedly part of the series' originality, there are two aspects that make *Oz* one of the most important series of this third "Golden Age" of television.

First of all, and this had never been done before on television, Fontana decided to kill the main character, Dino Ortolani, in the pilot episode of the series. By doing this, he introduced a series without a protagonist<sup>11</sup>. After having watched countless hours of these new television series, audiences have since gotten used to main characters disappearing mid-season, but not before *Oz* had first aired. Obviously, Ortolani's killing was meant to provoke the viewer, who felt at a loss by the end of the first episode and, uneducated for this kind of series, wondered why he should keep watching. The second absolutely original aspect of *Oz* is the fact that all characters are bad men, either villains or utterly flawed. Thus, it is the routine of these men that is the compelling element of *Oz*. The comings and goings of a state prison in the United States by the end of the '90s, although a fictional world, bet on the realism of the inmates' relationships, the dynamics between prisoners and correction officers and ultimately the power struggles between those in charge of the prison and the political pressures from the outside world. As it will be discussed further on regarding *The Wire* (2002-2008), whose main character is the city of Baltimore, in Fontana's *Oz* the main character is the prison itself.

Inside Oswald State Correctional Facility there is an experimental unit called "Emerald City", an apparently controlled microcosm ran by Tim McManus, a man who firmly believes prisoners can be rehabilitated. Emerald City, of course, is the fictional city where Dorothy ends up after following the yellow brick road in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). One of the possible readings of this book suggests

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<sup>11</sup> One may argue that the dynamics between Tobias Beecher (a lawyer convicted for vehicular manslaughter while driving intoxicated) and Vern Schillinger (head of the Aryan Brotherhood, convicted for aggravated assault and conspiracy to commit murder, and who takes it upon himself to turn Tobias's life into a living hell) is the narrative axis of the series, but it is clear that none of these men takes the lead as protagonist.

how Dorothy is on a journey to completion. (Vogler, 1998: 96) In the story, all characters are lacking something – a brain, a heart, courage or simply the wish to return home – so they set for Emerald City to find the Wizard of Oz, who will help them get what they want. In this sense, the prisoners in Oz are all said to lack something, either common sense or a sense of morality, and their journey has led them there, to Emerald City. Shirley Bellinger, a young mother who was sentenced to death in Oz after having drowned her infant daughter, states:

Let's say a young man mugs someone, a young girl steals twenty purses from Sears, a young mother drowns her daughter. The one thing they're all said to lack is common sense. Somewhere along the way they lost their ability to think correctly. But look at Oz. Common sense creates the common criminal. The desire to do right is probably the most uncommon sense of all. (*Oz*, 6:02 "See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Smell No Evil")

Nonetheless, in Baum's story the Wizard is a fake, a humbug, and ultimately his gift is telling Dorothy and the others that change lies within themselves, that what they seek they will have to find within them. So are the reformist ideas of Tim McManus: in Emerald City the prisoner gets a chance to grow and better himself, to become responsible for his actions and to want to change and improve on his own so he can get back to the outside world as a new man. But Emerald City is nothing more than a utopia, despite McManus's herculean efforts to rehabilitate its prisoners.

Inside Oz, inmates are separated into different groups, each with their own representatives. Cohabiting in Emerald City are the Muslims, the Aryan Brotherhood, the Wiseguys, the African-American Homeboys, the Latinos, the Irish, the gays, the bikers and the Christians, besides all the other characters that do not belong to any specific group. Characters such as Tobias Beecher, Vern Schillinger, Simon Adebisi, Ryan O'Reilly, Miguel Alvarez, Kareem Said and Chris Keller, among others, take turns as main characters in specific narrative plots that compose the wider mosaic of *Oz*. Besides the inmates, the already mentioned Tim McManus, the prison warden Leo Glynn, the Catholic nun and psychologist Sister Peter Marie, the attending physician Dr Gloria Nathan and the chaplain Father Ray Mukada act as connectors with the outside world, although often struggling to make sense of their own circumscribed lives. As some kind of Greek chorus figure, the inmate Augustus Hill (confined to a wheelchair

after having been thrown off a roof for killing a police officer and convicted for drug possession and murder) is the narrator of the series. Talking directly to the camera, therefore creating an intimate bond with the viewer (similarly to what Frank Underwood does in *House of Cards* but with a very different purpose), he tells the stories that have led to the inmates' convictions and tentatively draws critical conclusions about human nature and the nature of the prison itself.

By choosing a prison, Fontana presented the viewer with a world populated by thieves, rapists, arsonists, paedophiles, drug addicts, etc., criminals who have been shunned by society for the crimes they committed. At the same time, the majority of that same society has no interest in their rehabilitation. The viewer becomes privy to a correctional facility that, despite the efforts of men with reformist minds such as Tim McManus, has no interest in the correction of the individual. The politics behind the prison stage are the constant impediment to improvement, thus condemning society itself to stagnation instead of regeneration.

When Fontana had pitched even mild versions of *Oz* to the broadcast networks, he said he was told, ““Oh, they’re all too nasty. Where are the heroes? Where are the victories?”” These questions simply didn’t apply at HBO. There were no obvious heroes in *Oz* – even the idealistic McManus had myriad flaws – and the villains tended to win, usually in the most gruesome way possible. (Sepinwall, 2013: 25)

There are only two characters that manage to get out of Oz Penitentiary: the already mentioned Tobias Beecher and Poet (a heroin addict convicted for armed robbery and attempted murder), only to return for further crimes committed, as if these men were constantly being sucked into the same vortex of criminal correction. All the other characters only escape the walls of Oz through death. This seems to be the essence of this prison: you cannot escape who you truly are. Understandably, this series is also a criticism of the American prison system. It is perhaps no coincidence that the United States stands for the country with the largest prison population in the world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In *The New York Times* online edition:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/world/americas/23iht-23prison.12253738.html>  
(accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016)

Oz accompanies the collective frustration period and civil unrest of the end of the '90s in the United States by introducing a gallery of unforgettable villains and their conspiracies to achieve control inside the prison walls. Curiously, in the last season of the series, the inmates are staging Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a tragedy about a treacherous murderer who gets more and more wrapped up in his own machinations and whose only escape is death. *Oz* ends on this tragic note with Beecher as Macduff killing Schillinger as Macbeth with a real blade instead of the prop knife. Nevertheless, the last episode of *Oz* ends with an anthrax attack on the prison and the inmates having to be moved to another facility. In the end, as in *The Sopranos*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, nothing ever really changes. What makes these men the way they are is not the place they find themselves in but what lies within themselves.

AUGUSTUS HILL: Genetics... or environment? Like in everything else, society searches for the magic bullet, the easy answer. Because the more complex the answer is the more terrified we become. Is the root of violence much deeper, much darker? How about pure evil? Maybe we human creatures are inherently evil. Maybe evil is ingrained, embedded in our souls. Flip Wilson used to joke: "The devil made me do it." Maybe he was right. Or maybe not. (*Oz*, 4:05 "Gray Matter")

*Oz* does not provide the answers, it only arouses questions in the viewer's mind, inciting him to critically judge for himself.

Whether their deviant behaviour is a product of society or a genetic predisposition, these criminals' journey to Emerald City has left them cornered and subjugated by the system. Not even by clicking their heels will they return home. When Tobias Beecher enters the gates of *Oz* it is already too late for him, because society will not do right by him. Men in *Oz* are statistical numbers and prisons become the ultimate "out of sight, out of mind" method of dealing with criminal actions. There is no redemption for these men because the world inside prison walls is as bad and violent as the world outside, there is already nothing to return to, for everything is meaningless. As if to stress this emptiness, Bob Rebadow, an older inmate in *Oz*, says: "The instinct to kill is as common as the need to procreate. Those of us in *Oz* are actually the normal ones... following nature's lead." (*Oz*, 4:06 "A Word to the Wise") *Oz* seems to suggest a new form of existentialism, perhaps, one that seems to evoke the

necessity of new morals and a new philosophy to encompass this type of *ordinariness of evil*. In the closing minutes of the series, the narrator Augustus Hill draws the inevitable conclusion for the six years the viewer has spent inside the walls of Oswald Penitentiary:

So, what have we learned? What's the lesson for today? For all the never ending days and restless nights in Oz. That morality is transient? That virtue cannot exist without violence? That to be honest is to be flawed? That the giving and taking of love both debases and elevates us? That God or Allah or Yahweh has answers to questions we dare not even ask? The story is simple. A man lives in prison and dies. How he dies, that's easy. The who and the why is the complex part. The human part. The only part worth knowing. (Oz, 6:08 "Exeunt Omnes")

The dark side of human nature became exposed in the halls of Emerald City as the country plunged into the abyss of a permanent war on terror that reinstated the Cold War rhetoric of *good versus evil, us against them*. Although it is clear that the culmination of the 1990s tension would only reach its apex with the terrorist attacks on World Trade Center in September 2001, something in the fabric of American society had already started to give in, clearly gathering momentum after the attacks. Emerging from the debris of this disenchanted world view, the new protagonist for the millennium started gaining his ground from the moment the gates of Oz were opened.

## **CHAPTER 2. Enter the Men**

### **2.1. *The Sopranos*: Coming in at the End**

*No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude  
without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.*  
Hawthorne (in *The Sopranos*, 1:05 "College")

By 1999 viewers were already familiar with complex portrayals of Italian-American mobsters in films, such as the Corleone family in Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974 and 1990) or the wise guys in Martin Scorsese's

*Goodfellas* (1990). So, when Tony Soprano first made his debut, the viewers already had some expectations about the mob genre.<sup>13</sup> *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), created by David Chase for HBO, set the tone for what the series of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be about: a man's struggle for power and control over others and himself amid a desolate reality.

From the time Tony Soprano waded into his pod to welcome his flock of wayward ducks, it had been clear that viewers were willing to be seduced.

They were so, in part, because these were also men in recognizable struggle. They belonged to a species you might call Man Beset or Man Harried – badgered and bothered and thwarted by the modern world. (Martin, 2013: 5)

Putting *The Sopranos* together was in itself the epitome of the American Dream as symbolic of a cable company, HBO, which became a synonym for quality television after the series premiered. *The Sopranos* turned out to be the television show that defined the third “Golden Age” of American television, for all the other shows that came after it were modelled after its boldness of subjects, its innovative storytelling, but, most of all, its difficult protagonist. Tony Soprano was the first of a series of protagonists unashamedly villainous, meaning that their set of virtues and flaws did not match those that would be expected of a hero in television thus far. All those who came after him, Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) and Frank Underwood (*House of Cards*), to name but a few, owe it to Tony Soprano for unleashing the monster at the core of their true selves. “*The Sopranos* had invited its audience to empathize with a character who was traditionally the villain.” (Sepinwall, 2013: 143) Following the villainous characters of *Oz*, HBO's *The Sopranos* introduced the first bad leading man, its trailblazing quality being the fact that Tony Soprano was a sociopath at the centre of a televised narrative.

From the first episode it becomes clear that Tony is an extremely violent man whose methods seem to be justifiable for the ends he wishes to attain. However, the opening sequence of *The Sopranos* pilot episode also shows a vulnerable man, a man

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<sup>13</sup> In its inception, this genre was connected to the *film noir* (some examples will be presented below) and it had been in existence since the 1930s. But it is the more modern versions by filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese or Brian De Palma that bear a more direct influence on the narrative and aesthetics of *The Sopranos*.



who is well aware of his shortcomings, a New Jersey mobster suffering from panic attacks who consults with a psychiatrist in the hopes of keeping them under control, as well as his life. Tony Soprano is a man who has lost control, who is at an existential crossroads, torn between an overbearing past (embodied by his mother Livia and his uncle Junior) and his posterity (his children Meadow and Anthony Jr., as well as his nephew Christopher Moltisanti).

The opening shot of *The Sopranos* pilot episode shows Tony Soprano in the waiting room of a therapist, Dr Jennifer Melfi. Recovering the notion that the protagonists of the millennium are men concerned with their identity, the fact that Tony is introduced not as an all-powerful mobster but a frail human being suffering from panic attacks demonstrates precisely that he is aware of his weaknesses and moral failings. He realises that something is wrong with his life, not necessarily because he considers himself to be a bad man, but because he feels out of synch with the world.

TONY: The morning of the day I got sick, I been thinking. It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came in too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.

DR MELFI: Many Americans, I think, feel that way.

TONY: I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in a lotta ways he had it better. He had his people. They had their standards. They had pride. Today, whadda we got?

(*The Sopranos*, 1:01 "The Sopranos")

More often than not Tony believes he is a good man caught up in a world where he is expected to perform in a certain way. He feels somewhat trapped by the legacy of his immigrant family and what it means to "be a man". His role model is that of Gary Cooper, "the strong silent type", the all American hero, the cowboy.

As stated by Mike Alsford, being a hero implies *being in the world* in a certain way. He argues that the hero stands "at the border of freedom and chaos" (2006: 22) and it is his fate to keep the balance between the two, simultaneously *in* the world and *outside* of it, permanently on the threshold. One of the epithets of the American hero is the figure of the cowboy, the Westerner. This hero, both real and imagined, lives on the frontier, whether physical or metaphorical, inhabiting the limbo between good and

evil. Taking into account the history of the United States, it is safe to assume that the American nation was built on violence. According to Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), the use of violence has led to the belief in a regeneration process that allowed the American nation to grow and expand. Violence becomes a necessary means of mastery over one's surroundings and over one's self, permitting that the mythic structure of the American West may settle on these foundations. Akin to Joseph Campbell's monomythic structure, in which the hero journeys into the unknown only to return victorious and master of two worlds, so Slotkin's *regeneration through violence* suggests a renewal that accompanies the crossing of frontiers. These frontiers may be physical borders, as in the case of the Western frontier(s), or mythical ones. However, it is the overcoming of such obstacles that creates the figure of the hero:

Men alternately setting loose and struggling to cage their wildest natures has always been the great American story, the one found in whatever happens to be the ascendant medium at the time. Our favourite genres – the western; the gangster saga; the lonesome but dogged private eye operating outside the comforts of normal, domestic life; the superhero with his double identities – have all been literalizations of that inner struggle, just as Huckleberry Finn striking out for the territories was, or Ishmael talking to the sea. (Martin, 2013: 84)

Nonetheless, protagonists, such as Tony Soprano, never seem to overcome the obstacles set in their course, whether these are hindrances to their own happiness or difficulties that arise from their lifestyle. Therefore, they never truly become heroes, despite their efforts to rationalise their behaviour into believing that they are “doing the right thing”. On his journey, the hero is expected to resort to violence to triumph over the forces of evil and this violence is forever justified in the name of a greater good that will ultimately favour his victorious return. But what happens if violence is to be found on both sides of these frontiers and not just on the threshold, where its regenerative powers should take effect? Violence ceases to be merely a means to an end and becomes a way of life. In the introduction to Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), Robert Parker writes:

Most cultures have at the heart of their national mythology the image of a man with a weapon. A killer of other men. It is, I think, less because such a man can impose his will on others, and more because he can maintain the clarity of himself. In “The Westerner,” Robert Warshaw [*sic*] writes: What he defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image – in fact his honor. This is what makes him invulnerable. When the gangster is killed, his whole life is shown to have been a mistake, but the image the Westerner seeks to maintain can be presented as clearly in defeat as in victory: he fights not for advantage and not for the right, but to state what he is, and he must live in a world which permits that. (2010: v)

Violence lies at the heart of the American hero. However, the use he makes of it must be justified. The hero resorts to violence only in the name of family or nation, he fights for love and honour and defends the values of the community, and he crosses the frontier between good and evil for something other than recognition and glory. He may wish to attain those things too, but never at the expense of others:

It is this that distinguishes the hero from the villain. In the face of the isolation that difference can generate the hero gives him or her self over to the world, and in so doing re-enters the world. The villain, on the other hand, deepens the gulf between self and other and sees dominance of the other as the only mode of engagement between themselves and the rest of the world. (Alsford, 2006: 29)

The villain is recognised by the way he appropriates others through violence and the way he exerts control over the world around him. He chooses to use his strength and power to obtain advantage over others. But the hero is able to use those qualities to help others by engaging with the rest of the world through selfless acts which derive from a deep felt empathy with others. Whereas the villain uses others and manipulates them as weapons to accomplish his goals, the hero turns himself into one for the battle against evil. According to Alsford, the hero and the villain are “aspects of the same tragic character” (2006: 124) and it is their individual response to particular situations that will determine their true nature, their *being in the world*.

Therefore, it is curious that Tony Soprano reveres the figure of the cowboy. The “strong silent type” of the likes of Gary Cooper carries all the symbolic weight of a nation of gunfighters, conquerors and cowboys, strong men who uphold a code of

honour. But Tony is not this type of man. He is the city gangster, another epithet of the American hero, who lives according to a very different code. As stated by Robert Warshow,

(...) the gangster – though there are real gangsters – is also, and primarily, a creature of the imagination. The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become. (2008: 584)

Tony Soprano's Hollywood counterparts, much more than Gary Cooper, are James Cagney as Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931), Edward G. Robinson as Caesar Enrico "Rico" Bandello in *Little Caesar* (1931) or Paul Muni as Antonio "Tony" Camonte in *Scarface* (1932), films that make incidental appearances in *The Sopranos*. When they join the *Cosa Nostra*, mobsters like Tony take an oath which serves to commit them to a code of honour that puts the *family* (here understood as the criminal enterprise which they have joined) above all else.

Tony may admire the "strong, silent," self-determined man embodied by Gary Cooper in Hollywood movies, but he never tries to embody that type. He is driven not by honor or courage, but by greed, pettiness, and fear, which he hides behind a wall of macho bravado, cutting humor, and frequent diatribes directed against those who fail to conform to the mafia code of conduct. (DeFino, 2014: 145)

However, Tony's feeling that he "came in at the end" reveals an awareness that he has come too late to a way of life that has already seen better days. The older generation of mobsters that Tony reveres so much, although regarded nostalgically by him and others like Christopher Moltisanti, is portrayed in *The Sopranos* as a dying breed, ending up either demented like his Uncle Junior or ratting on to the FBI, like New York boss Carmine Lupertazzi. Tony's admiration for his father's generation is seen in the way he tries to groom his nephew Christopher. But because he no longer believes in his own generation's values he wonders what kind of legacy he can pass on to his nephew and, ultimately, his children. Thus, despite being about the New Jersey mob world, *The Sopranos* is also a self-referential series, deconstructing mobster clichés and the role of the modern hero.

The gangster story, one of the grand narratives of American fiction, by the time of *The Sopranos* looks in on itself self-referentially, almost parodically. The difference between the Westerner and the gangster is that the latter is a criminal at heart. The good/bad guy qualities of the former make him a hero, someone who needs to be bad in order to survive in the world, but who is pure of heart, inherently good, putting the needs of others above his own. He fights for the community, for love, for family, for mankind in a broader sense, while the gangster fights only for himself. The gangster is a villain and it is his hubris that causes his downfall. But, according to Tony, it was this man who made America what it is today. Considering the Westerner conquered the wilderness, the gangster seized the city.

The essence of *The Sopranos* seems to be condensed in a scene where Tony is in therapy with Dr Jennifer Melfi. Talking about his nephew Christopher, he says:

TONY: He's not the type that deserves hell.

DR MELFI: Who do you think does?

TONY: The worst people. The twisted and demented psychos who kill people for pleasure. The cannibals, the degenerate bastards that molest and torture little kids, and they kill babies. The Hitlers, the Pol Pots. Those are the evil fucks that deserve to die. Not my nephew.

DR MELFI: What about you?

TONY: What? Hell? You been listening to me? No. For the same reasons. We're soldiers. Soldiers don't go to hell. It's war. Soldiers... they kill other soldiers. We're in a situation where everybody involved knows the stakes. And if you're gonna accept those stakes... you gotta do certain things. It's business, we're soldiers. We follow codes... Orders.

DR MELFI: So does that justify everything you do?

(*The Sopranos*, 2:09 "From Where to Eternity")

This seems to be the heart of the matter. Tony rationalises his way of life by considering himself a soldier. Legitimising his position in a world where he was born to and that abides by very specific rules makes him an asset in a very particular fight where, to a certain extent, he considers himself fighting for a good cause. And he continues his plea, stating that these were the men who built America. Answering Dr Melfi's question, Tony goes on:

Excuse me, let me tell you something. When America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? Because

they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make 'em richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers, they needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us. Honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action. We weren't educated like the Americans. But we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks... those other... the JP Morgans, they were crooks and killers too, but that was a business, right? The American way. (*The Sopranos*, 2:09 "From Where to Eternity")

In this way, Tony inserts his lifestyle into the American narrative. But this is only an attempt to justify his evil deeds. If, like the Westerner, he believes he is fighting for a good cause, then, in his mind, that legitimisation seems to be enough to make him a hero.

By nostalgically plunging into the depths of the old time gangster, into the black and white world of the *film noir*, *The Sopranos* turns its critical focus to the present time of the United States. The disenchanted America of the end of the '90s falls under the scrutiny of a self-reflection that satirically depicts these criminal heroes of the past, such as Al Capone, who unquestionably present attractive narratives (the narrative of the immigrant who fought his way up the ladder of the American Dream and became a legend), yet at their core they are nothing but the exaltation of the criminal mind. Later, while analysing the series *Dexter*, it will be discussed how the figure of the serial killer is subject to the same type of cynical admiration.

Tony Soprano *wants to be* like Gary Cooper, but in the end he *is* merely a New Jersey criminal grappling with his frustrations, protecting his family and his interests while pursuing a happiness that is as fickle as his bouts of anger. The viewer identifies with him because of how ordinary he is in his existential struggle. "Tony must be different from us in order to satisfy our wishes. But, it might be suggested, our link with Tony is not based on the grounds of what we wish to become, but on the grounds of what we already are." (Carroll, 2004: 126) Above all, Tony wishes to dominate and control those around him. As discussed above, villains use others as means to an end, manipulating and conspiring until they get what they want. Tony wants admiration and respect from his peers and will stop at nothing to prove his authority as acting boss.

Since the fifth episode of the first season ("College"), the viewer engages in Tony's psychopathic behaviour after watching him choke a man to death, a man he ran into by accident while visiting colleges with his daughter. The man was Fabian "Febby" Petrulio, who after becoming an informant for the FBI, entered the witness protection programme. Though he is not a menace anymore, Tony *chooses* not to let him go. Like a hero, he acts on the freedom of his choices, unfettered by moral conventions or social rules, doing what he thinks is right and respecting his code. "We have a pro-attitude toward Tony because he actualizes, albeit fictionally, the sort of abandon we want for ourselves – the capacity to pursue our desires unshackled and, in large measure, unpunished." (Carroll, 2004: 125) But because he is motivated solely by revenge, this becomes an act of villainy, and of simply tying the loose ends his lifestyle does not let him leave untied. This is his code of honour, however twisted that sense of honour may be.

Tony's violent criminal acts are simple demonstrations of power in a world already brimming with violence. He was brought up in the world of organised crime; it is all he knows, so he must resort to violence in order to survive. Survival, in this sense, does not always mean he must fight for his life, but also that to keep his legacy alive, who he is, he must live up to the image of the gangster. For if he shows any weakness he will be overcome and most likely eliminated. So, it is the perpetuation of a myth (the hero figure, either cowboy or gangster), to a certain extent, what is at stake in *The Sopranos* and what Tony is fighting for.

TONY: I got the world by the balls and I can't stop feeling like I'm a fucking loser. (...) It's everything and everybody. I see some guy walking down the street, you know, with a clear head. You know the type. He's always fucking whistling like the happy fucking wanderer. And I just wanna go up to him and I just wanna rip his throat open, I wanna fucking grab him and pummel him right there, for no reason. Why should I give a shit if a guy's got a clear head? I should say "a salut", good for you.

DR MELFI: Let's just get back to smashing my face.

TONY: Jesus Christ. Oh!

DR MELFI: No, I think it all ties in.

TONY: Alright. Sometimes I resent you making me a victim, that's all.

DR MELFI: I make you feel like a victim?

TONY: Yeah. Remember the first time I came here? I said... the kind of man I admire is Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type. And how all Americans, all

they're doing is crying and confessing and complaining. A bunch of fucking pussies. Fuck 'em! And now I'm one of them, a patient."  
(*The Sopranos*, 2:06 "The Happy Wanderer")

As it becomes apparent as the series progresses, there seem to be two Tonys, not always cohabiting peacefully with one another. There is Tony Soprano the Mafia boss and Tony Soprano the family man. The issue of dualism is another hallmark of these recent series. These protagonists, while acting out on antisocial behaviour impulses reveal the duality of their personalities. Cases other than Tony Soprano will be discussed below. The two Tonys must balance their relationship with the distinct worlds of the two different families: the Mafia and his actual family. Alternating between the two and unable to choose who he truly wants to be, Tony Soprano becomes not a master of two worlds, like the hero in Campbell's definition, but a mirrored image of himself, who has clearly succumbed to the energy of his dark side. Committing to his inner demons, he wears the mask of Janus to travel between both worlds, thus allowing him to be both a loving father and a ruthless criminal.

*The Sopranos* ends on a bittersweet note in its last episode "Made in America" with an abrupt cut to black as Tony looks up from the table of the diner where his family is about to eat. The diegetic music on the juke box, Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'", is cut as the chorus says "don't stop". After the cut, the screen goes black for a while before the end credits roll.

The build-up of tension is extraordinary. We expect either brutal violence or some sort of cathartic breakthrough, but are given neither. After eight years of rich storylines and complex characters the likes of which television had not seen before, *The Sopranos* ended with a shrug rather than a bang. (...) After all, the show had been confounding viewer expectations from the start: undercutting character sympathy with deliberate acts of cruelty; killing off beloved characters; rarely tying up loose ends; and generally treating its moral compass like the spinner in a game of Twister. (DeFino, 2014: 98-99)

Furthermore, the ending of *The Sopranos* is a comment on the nature of change. Tony's character does not change. After he has been shot (during his dream-induced state in the hospital in season six he kept asking "Who am I? Where am I going?"), Tony states that he will appreciate life more, for each day is a gift, but it is clear that



life goes on in a “business as usual” fashion. He fails to change because such is the nature of tragic characters. “Every day is a gift, but does it have to be a pair of socks?” (*The Sopranos*, 6:09 “The Ride”), Tony says. His permanent dissatisfaction proves that he will never be complete, no matter how frustrated he feels, how lost, how miserable, his utter self-involvement and consequent psychopathic behaviour is the cause of his undoing. Like other tragic heroes whose wish is to fly too close to the sun, he ultimately brings it on himself. In addition, he feels trapped in a life he did not choose but to which he was born to:

TONY: You’re born to this shit. You are what you are.

DR MELFI: Within that there’s a range of choices. This is America.

TONY: Right. America.

(*The Sopranos*, 1:07 “Down Neck”)

Tony Soprano’s understanding of his place in the world and consequent disenchantment is what makes him a tragic character. Despite his pride, or perhaps because of it, the consciousness of his role as a soldier prepares him for war. Nevertheless, as *The Wire* will also stress, this is a war with no victors. Everyone loses and everyone dies. What then is the place of the hero? Is there still a good fight to be fought? Tony’s search for meaning is a pointless pursuit. His tragic flaw is his own vulnerability, which is also that which makes him human. His undoing is brought about by holes in his armour. Not because such holes reveal his weakness, but because they fail to make him change. In the absence of change, there are no lessons learnt, no boons to be shared, no balance restored. The hero protagonist has failed to cross the threshold and back, remaining tragically in between. Lost, adrift, cut off from the world, he is painfully alone and beyond the redemption he sought to restore the balance that had been lost in the first place.

To those who do not descend from the bloodline of a Founding Father, to those who no longer believe that a conversation of ideas and energy and honesty can save the world, to those cut adrift from orthodox values and traditional notions of virtue, there is no continuity, no tradition, no great future, only some money stuffed in a mattress, the odd pleasure where it can be found, and a commitment to live “like there’s no tomorrow, because there isn’t one.” (DeFino, 2014: 159)

Like Sisyphus, Tony Soprano's fate is a continuous struggle towards a fruitless end. Knowing that he will have to push the rock up the hill for all eternity only to have it roll back down every single day is the only future he can aspire to. What still makes him human is the hope, however vain, that one day the rock will settle on top of the hill.

## 2.2. *The Wire*: This Is America

McNULTY: *If every time Snotboogie would grab the money and run away...  
why'd you even let him in the game?*

BOY: *What?*

McNULTY: *If Snotboogie always stole the money, why'd you let him play?*

BOY: *Got to. This is America, man.  
(The Wire, 1:01 "The Target")*

*The Wire* (2002-2008)<sup>14</sup>, created by David Simon for HBO, is primarily a series about the city of Baltimore and its institutions, an allegory that serves as criticism of the American cityscape and of the relationship between law enforcement and the plight of the common man. During its five seasons, the series tackles the war on drugs as it is being fought by the Narcotics and Homicide departments of the Baltimore police, the blue collar workers represented by the stevedores in Baltimore harbour and their labour union struggles and connection with contraband, the political system and its unrelenting bureaucracy, the education system and subsequent governmental implications and finally the print news media and their political influence. *The Wire* builds upon the severe denunciation of American institutions, populating its five seasons with characters that are at the mercy of an implacable political machine.

The series deals head on with corruption and the hypocrisy subjacent to the different chains of command present in every institution. *The Wire* is a complex series, using realistic dialogues to draw the viewer close to what life is like for the little man, the lowly addict, the drug kingpin, the alcoholic detective, the corrupt mayor, the honest smuggler. There is not a protagonist in this series, as it was also mentioned above in relation to *Oz*, the main character being the city of Baltimore itself. Just like in

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<sup>14</sup> References in this subchapter relate mainly to the first three seasons of *The Wire*.

*Oz*, *The Wire* has so many characters, and they are all so carefully depicted, that providing a simple outline of its narrative structure becomes an ungrateful task. The narrative of *The Wire* is weaved as if it were a novel. Most of its scenes focus on the in-betweens of crime, justice and law enforcement, on the details of the system, levelling all characters and presenting them as both victims and criminals in a social tragedy that unfolds unromanticised. To further stress the realistic fiction aspect, every episode begins with an epigraph, but instead of meaningful quotes, these are just trivial lines uttered by any one of the characters at some point, their scope being merely circumstantial.

The cogs in the machine and what makes it keep going is what the series is about. The street lingo, which at times makes it hard to watch and understand, is the code for an America constantly abandoned by the game of political interests. An America where almost everyone profits from turning a blind eye to the drug trade while in the process crushing the future of a city that is brimming with crime and corruption. As Sepinwall argues,

*The Sopranos* comes across as deeply cynical about humanity, while *The Wire* believes that any innate goodness within people eventually gets ground down by the institutions that they serve. They are shows about the end of the American dream. (2013: 112)

The deconstruction of character types is one of its most enticing aspects. Omar Little, an African-American homosexual and soft-spoken gangster who only robs from drug dealers, never goes after innocent people and never swears, represents the tenuous threshold between what makes a hero or a villain. He can be seen as a good man, even helping the Baltimore police to corner drug kingpin Avon Barksdale's right-hand man Stringer Bell to avenge for his lover. But Omar is also a bad man, a thief and a murderer, roaming the streets with his spine-chilling whistle. Nevertheless, he targets his victims carefully, confronting only those who he believes deserve to be punished. Despite his villainous qualities, he upholds a code, which he honours:

OMAR: I mean, don't get it twisted, I do some dirt too, but I ain't never put my gun on nobody who wasn't in the game.

BUNK: A man must have a code.

OMAR: No doubt.  
(*The Wire*, 1:07 "One Arrest")

OMAR: Hey, look, I ain't never put my gun on no citizen.

ATTORNEY LEVY: You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off...

OMAR: Just like you, man.

ATTORNEY LEVY: ... the culture of drugs... Excuse me? What?

OMAR: I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right?

(*The Wire*, 2:06 "All Prologue")

Omar condenses what *The Wire* is all about by putting himself neck and neck with the representative of the legal system. Each of them using their weapon of choice, they are both pawns in the same game. Who is to say that the law man represents *good* and the thief *evil*? This particular attorney is the legal defender of criminals, such as Avon Barksdale, and his purpose is to represent their interests, often permitting them to be released on a technicality. On the other hand, Omar is after those same criminals for a Robin Hood type of justice. Thus, they are both fundamental pieces of the same unbalanced system.

To further deconstruct character types, Russell "Stringer" Bell, a cold ruthless gangster, is presented with an unusual composure, a businessman acting as second in command for drug lord Avon Barksdale and controlling most of Baltimore's drug trade, an ambitious shadow who goes to great lengths to orchestrate the murder of innocent people, such as Wallace (a kid who works for him as a drug courier in the housing projects) and D'Angelo Barksdale (the nephew of his business partner and boss Avon whose only wish is to get out of the "game").

There is a world beyond heroes and villains, where evil is so commonplace that we note it with curiosity rather than shock, and where cold-blooded gangsters like Stringer Bell wear reading glasses, sip tea, and attend business classes at the local community college. When virtue does make its occasional appearance (...) it is quickly swallowed up by the surrounding darkness. (DeFino, 2014: 124-5)

The sympathy one might feel for Tony Soprano or the wish to see him triumph is misplaced in the streets of Baltimore, where rooting for truth and justice seems to be a vain attempt. Even honest people are involved in some kind of criminal activity. At the same time, not all criminals are bad people. Still, everyone seems to have been pulled into the same undistinguishable turmoil of Baltimore's political game.

There is constant talk about "the game" and its "players", whether referring to the drug trade or the law enforcement sphere. It is nonetheless a dog-eat-dog world where there is no salvation or redemption and where even honest people get tangled up in paperwork and a bureaucracy of Kafkaesque proportions which prevents them from doing real law enforcement work. Omar, stating his position in that "game", says: "The game is out there. You either play or get played." (*The Wire*, 1:08 "Lessons") Earlier in the series, Detective Jimmy McNulty had already talked about "the game" in a similar fashion: "We're a little like you, Omar. Out here on our own, playin' the game for ourselves." (*The Wire*, 1:06 "The Wire") The police, just like the criminals they are chasing, are the equivalent pawns of an equally corrupt world.

Jimmy McNulty is a rogue detective, a man whose behaviour is condemned by his superiors but who nonetheless wants to fight the good fight, bringing criminals to justice. However, he is a liar, an alcoholic and a womaniser, having cheated on his wife and being an irresponsible father, pursuing some of his police work for petty revenge against his superior Major Rawls, and using his lover, Assistant State's Attorney Rhonda Pearlman, for his own personal gain. Therefore, just like Tim McManus and his reformist ideas in *Oz's Emerald City*, he is likable and unlikable for the same amount of reasons.

In the end, he chooses early retirement, the case against Stanfield falls apart, and the balance of power in Baltimore is restored, with the politically powerful advancing, and the junkies and corner boys sinking deeper and deeper into violence, addiction and oblivion. Despite McNulty's efforts, the machine grinds on, its issue as ugly as it is inevitable. (DeFino, 2014: 125)

Jimmy McNulty pushes on to get ahead in the game, although he knows it is a relentless and inconclusive one. In the third season, Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin,

talking to the community deacon<sup>15</sup>, battered by his own failure in that same game, says:

COLVIN: But you know what? The shit out there. The city is worse than when I first came on. So what does that say about me? About my life?

DEACON: Come on, man. You're talking about drugs. That's a force of nature. That's sweeping leaves on a windy day, whoever the hell you are. You fought the good fight.

(*The Wire*, 3:02 "All Due Respect")

With merciless enemies represented by faceless corporations and by the political system, the ordinary policeman and the common addict are on the same side of an unbalanced reality, often sharing the frustration brought about by the inability to change anything within the confinement of the system.

In *The Wire* true villainy resides in American institutions. And just like in *Oz*, this is a war without victors, a battle that no one can win, for the game is rigged from the get go. The viewer can only passively witness the degradation of the American city without needing to sugar coat any aspect that might make it seem other than what it is: an ugly war with good and bad men on either side in an America with no common goals or hopes. *The Wire's* America is a place where psychopaths can turn a profit. The vigilante features already present in Omar Little acquire a whole new dimension when Dexter Morgan makes his appearance in the broad daylight of Miami.

### **2.3. *Dexter*: Born in Blood**

DEXTER: *There's something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like you're in a new and daring section of Disney World. Dahmer Land.*  
(*Dexter*, 1:01 "Dexter")

As stated above, the history of the United States was built upon narratives of violence with its real life heroes being represented in fiction by violent men, lone gunmen,

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<sup>15</sup> Curiously, the actor who played the deacon, Melvin Williams, had been an actual drug dealer in Baltimore in the '70s and '80s and was a source for the creation of Avon Barksdale's character.

masked avengers and mysterious vigilantes who, nevertheless, were seen to be fighting for the “right” reasons. Following this tradition, the figure of the serial killer is also, to a certain extent, romanticised by North-American culture. The outlaw has always been a seductive symbol, someone who lives on the fringes of society with his own moral values (or the absence thereof), and someone who is deeply individualistic, often invoking a hero status that society not only does not condemn but makes a point of celebrating. The cult of the serial killer, of the savage and narcissistic rebel is the expression of an America whose violence bursts at the seams and whose landscape seems to be the ideal stage for the representation of these narratives, equally seductive by their horrific and romantic qualities.

In most cases, serial killers, whose psychopathy is revealed to be an inability to conform to social rules and who can be legally defended as mentally insane, are also infantilised in the sense that they do not seem to understand the world according to parameters of normality. Thus, these criminals are often seen as victims of a society which condemns them. The often tenuous frontier between innocent and guilty, responsible or alienated also belongs to the cult of the romantic hero, such as the cowboy or the gangster.

From Norman Bates to Hannibal Lector [*sic*] and Jeffrey Dahmer to Tom Ripley, the psychopath has cut a riveting figure in the popular culture of the last century. His (for the most recognizable incarnations have been largely male) particular power to inspire terror and loathing derives in part from his ability to pass as ‘normal.’ Cunning, seductive, and utterly devoid of remorse, he flouts morality and flaunts his indifference to the bonds of sociality. (Schmeiser, 2013: 164)

In line with this tradition of misfits comes Dexter Morgan, the hero of Showtime’s *Dexter* (2006-2013), whose narrative was adapted by James Manos Jr. from the series of novels by Jeff Lindsay. Dexter, a forensic analyst, husband, father and serial killer is a protagonist whose moral judgement seems to be impaired by a compulsion to kill. Just like Tony Soprano, Dexter wants to be good. But because he lacks the psychological traits that would make him feel empathy towards others, he finds it difficult to simply be normal. As the other characters discussed so far, acknowledging this insurmountable flaw makes him engage in a continuous struggle with his identity, a

battle with a powerful inner monster that prevents him from having a normal and fulfilled life.

Clinically, Dexter may be defined as a psychopath. For the first time in the history of television, the protagonist is a serial killer. What immediately attracts the viewer to the world of Dexter is the intimate tone of the voice over. By engaging in Dexter's inner thoughts, the viewer also becomes an accomplice of his motivations. Simply put, a psychopath is someone unable to feel empathy towards others. He does not understand social codes or emotions and he is frequently a manipulator. According to several studies, the level of psychopathy may vary from one person to another, as well as the influence of that pathology on the individual's behaviour:

Psychopathy, however, is not just about the bad things people do (which is an aspect of psychopathy known as *antisocial behavior*), but is also about a particular set of personality traits that includes emotional shallowness, superficial charm, impulsivity with poor judgment, deceitfulness, unreliability, manipulation, and disregard for the feelings of others. Psychopathy is frequently, but not always, associated with criminal behavior. (DeFife, 2010: 7)

However, it is precisely criminal behaviour that which exerts the greatest attraction. Curious as to the motivations of the criminal, the viewer wants to understand what is at the origin of a deviant behaviour, which becomes a way of testing the limits of his own psychology. He not only wants to know *how* certain actions were executed but also *why* they were executed.

But Dexter is not a conventional psychopath, often deviating from the clinical standard. "When leading medical figures envisioned psychopathy as a kind of intermediate state between 'normality' and legal insanity, they simultaneously conceived of its subject, the psychopath, as the quintessential criminal: cunning, canny, and amoral." (Schmeiser, 2013: 193) Obviously, being a fictional character, the more borderline his personality characterisation is within the reality of his universe the more complex his choices and actions become. In this sense, Dexter is a "good" psychopath. He is the protagonist and he maintains the viewer on his side seducing him with his voice over narration. "Dexter Morgan is the quintessential American serial killer of the post-9/11 era in that he is provided with an abundance of characteristics



that make him a sympathetic, even identificatory, figure to the audience.” (Schmid, 2010: 133) He is a psychopath with a conscience and the awareness that he *must be good*. The irony is that for Dexter to be good and to behave in a socially accepted manner by sublimating his instincts he must kill, he must unleash his inner monster so that his Dark Passenger can be both satisfied and controlled.

Playing on the threshold of morality, *Dexter* proposes that the viewers side with a serial killer. However good he tries to be, he is still a sadistic murderer who engages in ritualistic behaviour when confronted with his chosen victims, pairing him with real life serial killers, such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy or Ed Gein. It remains to be seen how sympathetic or familiar can his character become.

For the most part, post-9/11 representations of serial killers shared marked similarities with their pre-9/11 counterparts, but, in some respects, the function of serial killers changed after the terrorist attacks. If serial killers had previously been the personification of random, terrifying evil, now they were on their way to being rehabilitated, or, at least, familiarized. (Schmid, 2010: 133)

David Schmid's claim that American serial killers became more familiar after 9/11 can be interpreted in the light of the fact that the menace of the terrorist attacks on World Trade Center came from outside of the United States, from an evil Other, uniting Americans against this external threat. Perhaps terrorists are seen as a bigger threat than the relatively cherished figures of some serial killers for the simple fact that their targets encompass a considerably greater number of people and, of course, the randomness and evilness of their crimes is greater than those of the individual serial killer. However, and this might be the main issue Schmid is trying to stress although he does not mention it, most terrorist attacks are anonymous (despite Osama Bin Laden having been the most despised man by any American citizen in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), hiding behind an entity that purports to engage in a holy war. Such is not the case with serial killers, although most of them try or expect to be anonymous till they are discovered. The particularity of their crimes is in the details that make up their criminal persona. Furthermore, it has been the role of the media to help in the establishing of the cult of the serial killer by not only publishing particulars about the crimes, but also helping in the conception of the serial killers' alter ego by labelling

them with creative names: the Zodiac Killer, the Milwaukee Cannibal, the Killer Clown, the BTK Killer, the Son of Sam, the Night Stalker, the Green River Killer, the Angel of Death, the Freeway Phantom, the Boston Strangler, and many more. It is precisely this exaltation of the individual that is at the origin of the romanticisation of the figure of the serial killer.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the appearance of the term “psychopath”, interest shifted from the crime towards the criminal, therefore stressing the relevance of the serial killer figure (Schmeiser, 2013). In Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), a pioneer work of what became known as the true crime genre, Capote, having heard about the brutal slaying of a family of farmers in Kansas, decided to conduct an investigation that aimed to understand the motivations of Richard “Dick” Hickock and Perry Smith, the authors of the murder. During trial they both pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity (which was denied), a plea that, within the legal system, takes responsibility away from the perpetrator who cannot be tried as a sane person, which in turn can result in mitigating circumstances. Earlier, in 1924, the popular case of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb who murdered a fourteen year old boy as an experiment for the perfect crime had caused quite a sensation.<sup>16</sup> “According to their confession, they committed the murder for no other reason than ‘to experience a hitherto untasted ‘thrill’ and to plan and carry out a ‘perfect crime’.” (Schmeiser, 2013: 182) At the time, the case shocked the population of Chicago even more when the criminals pled guilty during trial, after which they offered a cold and calculating account of the murder. Without any insanity allegations, the most shocking thing was realising that these boys were simply “normal” citizens. A cruel intelligence being one of the aspects that characterises a psychopath, this case confused criminal psychopathologists.

By reinvigorating the old notion of moral or volitional insanity, but refashioning it away from the fraught category of the insane, forensic psychiatrists created a new category of person: a morally diseased subject whose pathology lay in his compromised will. By his very definition, then, the psychopath presented a legal, as well as a medical, conundrum. (Schmeiser, 2013: 192)

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<sup>16</sup> This crime inspired Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), a film also based on Patrick Hamilton’s play with the same title.

The fascinating aspect of psychopaths and/or serial killers is that they seem to be normal people who are rarely distinguished by obvious features or particular physical traits. In the case described above, the two young men, for the public in general, would never have been associated to such brutal acts. As fiction and real life have often demonstrated, criminals may be those who arouse less suspicion. Commonly quiet, kept to themselves, reserved, good neighbours or particularly affectionate with children or animals, these psychopaths share the chameleonic particularity of blending in the crowd. The connection between psychopathology and the legal system reached its zenith when criminal behaviour started to be considered as propelled by unconscious drives and motivations. As the insanity defence came into effect, the focus became the individual instead of his crime:

Psychiatry's most striking contribution to the legal treatment of criminals derived from its primary focus on the individual offender and his or her psychic condition. This individualized approach to understanding criminality, however, one that was captured in the oft-repeated mantra '[t]reat the criminal rather than the crime,' also marked psychiatry's seemingly insurmountable difference from law. (Schmeiser, 2013: 189)

If the verdicts of guilty or innocent start sharing ever more tenuous borders the more the neurological processes of the human brain are studied and perceived, the serial killer becomes a fascinating case study.

It is within this context that Dexter Morgan makes his entrance. Different from his counterparts Tony Soprano, Walter White and Frank Underwood, Dexter is a killer from his very origin. His quest becomes one to understand why he is the way he is and how he can cope with a world he does not fully comprehend and which will never accept him. While those other protagonists are infatuated with their power over others, Dexter attempts to control his true self by journeying into the recesses of his inner monster:

Blood. Sometimes it sets my teeth on edge. Other times, it helps me control the chaos. The code of Harry, my foster father, is satisfied. And so am I. Harry was a great cop here in Miami. He taught me how to think like one, how to cover my tracks. I'm a very neat monster. (*Dexter*, 1: 01 "Dexter")

He is aware of the monstrosity of his acts and that he cannot help being who he is, yet throughout the series he tries to change. And although he cannot escape who he truly is he is capable of selfless acts in the name of a greater good, which makes him a kind of superhero who seems to have a lot in common with Batman.

Just like Batman, Dexter is a vigilante whose mission is catching those who have evaded justice. Born in blood, he witnessed his mother being murdered when he was still a child. Likewise, Batman saw his parents being murdered. Somehow, Batman seeks revenge for that criminal act that scarred him for life, while Dexter actuates his repressed trauma in the killing of other killers. Using the Code of Harry, a set of rules his foster father taught him in order to control his impulses, Dexter channels his killer instincts to rid the world of greater threats than himself. Dexter's struggle is to try and appear normal in order not to get caught. Constantly alternating between Dexter, the blood spatter analyst and family man, and Dexter, the serial killer, he is caught up in a dual personality. Again, just like Batman (or any superhero, for that matter). Whereas Batman's secret identity is Bruce Wayne, the millionaire playboy, Dexter's hidden identity bears the name the Dark Passenger, a persona through which he conveys his killing instincts. Dexter makes up this alter ego as a way to shift responsibility away from him. By acknowledging the monster he also acknowledges his duality and that is the reason he can never be fully integrated in society. Just like Tony Soprano, living on the frontier between family man and Mob boss, Dexter is caught up in a similar dilemma. He can never truly be just a family man or just a serial killer, his prowess is in balancing the two: conquering a place in society while appeasing his inner monster. His is a quest for self-control.

Starting with *Dexter's* opening credits, which expose his morning routine, the irony with which his gestures are portrayed, serving as metaphors of association to blood and torture, sets the tone of the series. Dexter undoubtedly wants to tease the viewer (much like Frank Underwood will do in *House of Cards*, an aspect to be discussed further on). Between the fascination and horror of the images, the opening credits suggest a game of appearances and misunderstandings that will be deconstructed throughout the series. "I don't know what it was that made me the way

I am, but whatever it was left a hollow place inside. People often fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all.” (*Dexter*, 1:01 “Dexter”) Through performance, Dexter is capable of fitting in and only the viewer is constantly aware of the man behind the mask, his true essence. Irony is also crucial in Dexter’s monologues. Part of the empathy the viewer feels for Dexter stems from the fact that he is able to share his motivations, fears and frustrations, but above all his Dark Passenger. Whenever the viewer accesses Dexter’s alter ego he becomes an accomplice of the lies and murders and other extreme situations that manipulate him into taking sides with a man he would have every reason not to want nearby.

Dexter does have a lovable side that draws us in and makes him a sympathetic character, as well. However, I believe what makes Dexter’s character redeeming to a wide audience is not just his lovability or his maintaining a fierce moral code even in his dissociative violent state, but also the fact that through Dexter’s inner dialogue we are able to see him as a deeply conflicted and divided character. In this, we are able to identify with him and are made aware that the difference between Dexter and us is only in the degree and character of these negative thoughts. (Firestone, 2010: 32)

Because of this complicity, the viewer hopes to better understand the reasons that drive Dexter. Thus, *Dexter’s* narrative structure is balanced on a game of catching or being caught.

As stated above regarding heroes and villains, most of these protagonists embody their own worst demons and their conflicts are mostly internal, with their psyche. It is no accident that Dexter’s father Harry comes to him in thought, although the viewer becomes privy to his physical presence. Because television is a visual medium, Dexter’s thoughts must be actualised, so Harry acts as his conscience. The very fact that he may have one, although this seems to have been imposed by his father under the Code of Harry, is also a sign that he tries to be *good*. For the sake of others, which is the hallmark of the hero. By upholding Harry’s Code, Dexter has a set of guiding principles not unlike the codes of honour of Tony Soprano or Omar Little. His vigilante qualities make him be anonymously admired at times for “taking out the trash”, for effectively catching those criminals whom justice has failed to condemn. His

first victim in the series is a paedophile named Donovan with whom he seems to have a lot in common:

DONOVAN: I couldn't help myself. I couldn't. I just... Please, you have to understand.

DEXTER: Trust me, I definitely understand. See, I can't help myself either. Children – I could never do that. Not like you. Never, ever kids.

DONOVAN: Why?

DEXTER: I have standards.

(*Dexter*, 1:01 “Dexter”)

His standards and his unwillingness to hurt children draw him closer to the figure of the hero. By following a code that targets other criminals, Dexter can be seen as fighting for the greater good, ridding the world of men worse than him. Talking to FBI agent Frank Lundy, a man who is chasing after the Bay Harbor Butcher, who is none other than Dexter himself, the issue of taking innocent lives emerges:

LUNDY: The worst killers in History are usually the ones who think the murders were somehow... just. Even deserved. Leaders have slaughtered whole populations for the same warped reason.

DEXTER: But there's never any justification for killing.

LUNDY: No. Well... one, of course. To save an innocent life.

(*Dexter*, 2:03 “An Inconvenient Lie”)

Dexter knows that his killings have spared many innocent lives. Yet, he also fails to see himself as a hero. His main struggle is to find some humanity within him. Although he is preventing killers to kill any more innocent people, his motives are selfish.

Again, Dexter is not a hero. His *being in the world* implies using others for his own personal gain. He uses his sister Debra by constantly lying to her, his wife Rita as the perfect partner in his make-believe social fiction, and his colleague Sergeant Dokes, leading almost everyone to believe he is the Bay Harbour Butcher (the alias chosen by the media as the police find Dexter's body dumpsite in the ocean). Like a villain, Dexter manipulates those around him in order to perpetuate his killing addiction. He may not understand why he does what he does, only that he has a compulsion to kill. But it is the fact that he struggles with these notions that makes him

a “good” psychopath. Maintaining the balance between enacting the code and being human while he does it seems to be his real challenge:

Dexter is not a hardcore unwavering psychopath. He has grown over the course of the series. He’s started to feel something akin to real fondness and concern for other people. He’s begun to worry that – should he ever get caught – his undoing would be devastating to other people, too, and not just to him. All those emotions make Dexter more human. But they also threaten to make him a less effective liar. Ironically, then, Dexter’s growing humanity may be his undoing. (DePaulo, 2010: 77)

Dexter understands social codes in the sense that he is aware that he must perform a function to fit in. The success of his *persona* (=mask) compromises the serial killer: for the latter to be effective, the former must be perfect. Therefore, Dexter is a seducer. Women like him because he is mysterious, his colleagues like him because he is thoughtful and playful, and children like him because he is affectionate. However, since the beginning, the most significant relationship he sustains is with his sister Debra (something that becomes more evident as the series progresses). In fact, in the first episode, Dexter says of Debra: “She’s the only person in the world who loves me. I think that’s nice. I don’t have feelings about anything but if I could have feelings at all, I’d have them for Deb.” (*Dexter*, 1:01 “Dexter”) But until the end of the sixth season, when she discovers who Dexter really is, she is unaware of her brother’s true nature. And it is precisely his nature that will eventually destroy her life.

Dexter, the good psychopath, becomes convincing because of his almost perfect rationality, yet he demonstrates that he is more emotionally complex than what one would have initially thought:

Dexter’s most prominent psychopathic features are his impoverished emotional life, his lack of remorse or guilt, and the way he masks that through deception and superficial charm. From the very beginning of the series, Dexter has told us that he doesn’t have feelings about anything at all and is a well-studied faker of human interactions. He doesn’t understand or experience conventional expressions of love, sexuality, comfort, grief, humor, or remorse. (DeFife, 2010: 7-8)

His perfect camouflage makes him a copycat of the most basic human emotions, a perfect specimen who is able to control those fake emotions to serve his killer instinct. In the end, just like with Tony Soprano, it is merely a matter of acting out control and power. It is the lust and the maintenance of that power which confer motivation to these characters.

His Dark Passenger is Dexter at his most genuine and authentic. Despite referring to his alter ego as a condition or an addiction, it becomes clear that this is the expression which truly defines him and also what is so enticing about him, the exposure of a weakness as an uncontrollable force of nature: "On the other hand, he does show moral grandiosity over his victims, imbuing himself with god-like control over who deserves to live or die, and you can't help but feel he takes pride in the elaborate mask he's constructed to fool everyone." (DeFife, 2010: 10) No matter how well he succeeds in wearing his mask, Dexter is aware that he will never be understood or accepted. What he is at heart, in his view, is a denial of humanity. Just like Batman's alter ego Bruce Wayne, condemned to the loneliness of the Wayne Manor, Dexter remains cut off from the world. "The willful taking of life represents the ultimate disconnect from humanity. It leaves you an outsider, forever looking in, searching for company to keep." (*Dexter*, 1:03 "Popping Cherry") By the end of the series, although Dexter finds in Hannah McKay the closest to a partner he could ever have, he knows that he will only harm those around him, therefore choosing to sail his boat into the eye of a hurricane. If this can be seen as a heroic act, the ultimate sacrifice, the fact that he does not die shows that he never truly changes. He is perpetually condemned to return, again mimicking Sisyphus's endeavour, for human nature is unpredictable and very difficult to control. The last episode, accordingly dubbed "Remember the Monsters?" is that ominous reminder. In this sense and metaphorically, Dexter's Dark Passenger, with more or less killer instinct, is the expression of a quality that permanently shadows human nature.

At the end of the first episode, Dexter looks at the camera (a gesture that is repeated on the very last shot of the series as well), defying the viewer, teasing him. The whole series is a provocation, in the sense that the viewer is invited to gaze at his own reflection in the mirror through the character of Dexter. The pleasure he takes from watching it is obviously related to breaking the rules (something that will be



discussed in relation to *Breaking Bad*), what is expected versus what one really wants to do. The pleasure of breaking the rules is infinitely greater than abiding by them and these characters, modern day Epicures, embodying a series of contradictions, are the most flawed perfect examples of what it means to be human. But even the tiniest flaw can bring down the firmest structure.

#### **2.4. *House of Cards*: Achilles Is Only as Strong as His Heel**

FRANK UNDERWOOD: *There is no solace above or below.  
Only us. Small, solitary, striving, battling one another.  
I pray to myself, for myself.  
(House of Cards, 1:13 "Chapter 13")*

Even a perfect and seemingly invulnerable warrior like Achilles had a weak spot. His vulnerable heel was the element at the origin of his downfall. Frank Underwood is a man whose weakness is yet to be unveiled, that one tragic flaw that will cause him to topple from his frail stronghold. *House of Cards* (2013-present)<sup>17</sup> is an American adaptation of a BBC mini-series with the same name developed by Beau Willimon for Netflix<sup>18</sup>. The American version is set in the contemporary world of politics, exposing the backstage of the political game and the machinations of its players.

As stated above, this series introduces an unscrupulous protagonist who will stop at nothing on his ascent to become the most powerful man of the free world, the President of the United States of America. Frank Underwood is everything a villain should be: ambitious, domineering, manipulative, cunning, seductive and ruthless. He is a man who believes he can control even his environment, proudly stating: "You see, Freddy believes that if a fridge falls off a minivan, you better swerve out of its way. I believe it's the fridge's job to swerve out of mine." (*House of Cards*, 1:04 "Chapter 4") As the series begins he is the Democratic Majority Whip in the House of Representatives and sees his desire frustrated for not making Secretary of State.

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<sup>17</sup> The fifth season will be released in March 2017.

<sup>18</sup> One of the particularities of this series is that every season has been released online in its entirety, allowing the viewer to choose how to watch it, without having to wait for each weekly instalment, a particularity of Netflix's original programming, which did the same with series such as the fourth season of *Arrested Development* (2013) or *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-present).

Instead of it being a deterrent, it serves as motivation for his unbridled ambition. Again, this is a series about control and the exertion of power. But Frank is not just an ambitious politician, he is also a lying, conniving and vicious murderer.

Undoubtedly, the world of politics has its own particular set of rules. As it was discussed above in regards to *The Sopranos* and the world of the New Jersey mafia (and in *Oz* and in *The Wire* specific universes, for that matter), *House of Cards* presents its merciless version of social Darwinism where a war of interests is permanently being effected. The political sphere being an arena for cruel battles between opponents and a place where only the strongest individuals get ahead in the game, Frank takes centre stage in a plot to overtake the Presidency of the United States. Although he shares the boon of power with his wife Claire, it becomes clear as the series progresses that he is doing it for himself alone. For three whole seasons his wife is on board with his scheming and is a complicit partner to all of his acts, from the ruining of careers to cold-blooded murder. However, in the beginning of the fourth season, Claire takes on the role of his antagonist, hoping to fend for herself against her husband's judgement. This turns out to be a temporary crack in their armour. Husband and wife join forces once more at the closing of the season with the following ominous words: "That's right. We don't submit to terror. We make the terror." (*House of Cards*, 4:13 "Chapter 52")

Frank Underwood is a bad man and unashamedly proud of it. He lies, tricks and deceives without remorse. Even when it appears he might falter at one situation or another, this merely gives him strength to pursue his blatant agenda. Much like Dexter, Frank creates a bond with the viewer by engaging in monologues that allow the audience to know what is on his mind. By talking directly to the viewer and exposing his true self without regret or shame, Frank breaks the fourth wall, bringing this series closer to the nature of a theatrical performance. From the opening scene of *House of Cards*, it becomes clear that this character is analogous to a Shakespearean villain of the scope of Richard III, pouring his venom and planting his Machiavellian ideas on the other characters' minds to gain leverage in the political game. Frank's opening statement in the first episode, talking directly to the camera as he kneels over a dog that has just been run over but is still alive, is as follows:

There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain, the sort of pain that's only suffering. I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this require someone who will act. Who will do the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing. [Kills dog] There. No more pain. (*House of Cards*, 1:01 "Chapter 1")

Using his words in the rhetoric of "kill or be killed", doing "what needs to be done", little by little Frank works his way up to the top, taking down every opponent in his way. In his understanding of the world there is no middle ground and no compromising. Zoe Barnes, a reporter with whom he had been having both a professional and sexual affair who starts meddling in things she should not meddle in, falls victim to Frank's lack of patience for what he terms "useless things". By killing her, Frank gets rid of yet another obstacle to his success: "For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain, there can be no mercy. There is but one rule: hunt or be hunted." (*House of Cards*, 2:01 "Chapter 14")

Frank Underwood is the product of the American Dream at play. Coming from a family of peach farmers in South Carolina he worked his way up by self-determination and self-reliance. A self-made man, though deeply individualistic and cruel, he steps on everyone who defies him while repeating the tale of his humble origins when it most suits him. His infatuation with power may not seem otherworldly were it not for his psychopathic and vile acts. In the eleventh episode of the first season, Frank kills Congressman Peter Russo (a young man he had been grooming to run for Governor of Pennsylvania), a weak man he manipulates and then crushes like a bug. This establishes Frank Underwood as a killer, showing he is not a "mere" player in the political game. He is a powerful villain and an attractive force to be reckoned with.

The 'dark side of the Force' is, undoubtedly, very seductive. The person who operates according to their own rules, who refuses to conform or be limited by convention or taboo has a strength and presence that it is hard to ignore and in some ways is hard not to admire. (Alsford, 2006: 95)

Frank Underwood elicits admiration because of the confidence and composure with which he behaves. He is a strong and fearless character who, even when it appears he is losing control, like when his wife Claire begins undermining his efforts to secure a

nomination for the next presidency, his mind wonders into fierce images of a bloody battle between him and her where they attempt to kill each other. Two bloodthirsty beasts, this series reveals a coming together of two brilliantly evil minds. When she falters, he reassures her:

CLAIRE: We're murderers, Francis.

FRANK: No, we're not. We're survivors.

(*House of Cards*, 3:06 "Chapter 32")

Considering them as survivors, Frank puts forth the idea that he does "what must be done". His arrogance (hubris) is the source of his strength. By confiding in the viewer he expects to gain an ally. Frank is the first to admit to his flaws, to vent his failures and frustrations, yet, unlike Dexter, he never regards them as weaknesses. There is always something to aspire to, an advantage to be gained from a seemingly precarious moment.

Having successfully made Vice-President of the US, he embarks on a relentless quest to overthrow the President, so he can take his place. In a moment when the President doubts Frank's intentions, he writes him a letter, where, to the President's question about not being able to shake a shadow of suspicion about Frank, he states: "Because I'm a liar, sir. Because I lack scruples and some would even say compassion. But that's just the image I present to the world because it elicits fear and respect. But it is not who I am." (*House of Cards*, 2:13 "Chapter 26") He is able to deceive everyone by telling the truth and then turning it around by making it seem a lie to favour his motivations.

Nevertheless, and because the series has not yet reached its end, there may still be a steep downfall for this man. Metaphorically, a house of cards is a frail undertaking, one that may topple at any moment. The most insignificant of things may cause it to collapse. Because Frank has been building his house of cards while leaving a trail of destruction behind, it is quite possible, following the tradition of the great Shakespearean tragic heroes, that he might be punished for his actions.

From the viewer's point of view there is an almost morbid pleasure for watching self-destructive characters, characters who defy the limits of morality and who use violence as manifestation of an internal flaw ruled by an overbearing alter

ego. In *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood's thirst for power makes way for the unleashing of his alter ego. In *Breaking Bad*, this alter ego takes over Walter White as he transforms into the super villain Heisenberg, an unprecedented metamorphosis in the history of television.

### CHAPTER 3. *Breaking Bad*: Growth, Decay, Transformation

*There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful.*  
in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

*Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), created by Vince Gilligan for AMC, is a series about an ordinary high school chemistry teacher who, after turning 50 and faced with the devastating news that he has terminal lung cancer, decides to start cooking methamphetamine to provide for his family. The premise of the series is quite simple: confronted with his own mortality, a man does everything he can to leave his family in a comfortable financial situation once he is gone. However, *Breaking Bad* is above all a narrative about metamorphosis and transformation. When pitching the series to AMC, Gilligan said he wanted to tell the story of "a good man [who] makes a wilful decision to become a bad guy".<sup>19</sup> Recovering the already mentioned idea of the tragic hero, the story of this series follows the trajectory of a man who decides to break bad. Breaking bad is an action that also implies transformation, going from one state to another.

Creator Vince Gilligan conceived the series to be predicated on character change to a degree that he had rarely seen on television, with the title indicating this transformative arc – "breaking bad" is an American southern idiom for someone losing his or her moral compass. (Mittell, 2015: 151)

Thus, *Breaking Bad* is about the nature of change. By the end of the series, the protagonist Walter White's metamorphosis is so complete that the viewer has been compelled to shift his allegiance to anyone but him. There seem to be two constants in

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<sup>19</sup> Vince Gilligan in "Breaking Bad Insider Podcast 1" with editor Kelley Dixon.  
<https://player.fm/series/breaking-bad-insider-podcast> (accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016).

the series. The first and most important one is the escalation of violence that accompanies Walt's transformation into a wickedly brilliant evil mastermind. The second constant, directly related to the first, is Walter White and Jesse Pinkman's relationship<sup>20</sup>. The whole narrative settles on the dynamics between the two, what sets them apart and what brings them together, and noticeably the closing scene of the series rests on a confrontation between the two.

The narrative takes place in the arid West of the United States, in the state of New Mexico. Similarly to the states of Arizona and Texas, due to their closeness to the Mexican border to the south and west, these states have been constantly struggling with drug trafficking, mostly connected to Mexican drug cartels, a very high crime rate, police corruption and pressing illegal immigration issues. The violence already inherent to this reality provides the appropriate setting for a series that tackles all of these issues, giving it a tone of a world beyond the law, an Old West with an urban essence. As discussed above regarding *Oz's* Penitentiary, *The Sopranos'* New Jersey or *The Wire's* Baltimore, *Breaking Bad's* New Mexico is essential to the unfolding of a plot which focuses on the making of a villain. Violence pervades the universe of these series conferring them with a sense of impending doom, not only tragically mirroring the reality of the actual places, but also, as discussed above, stressing a distinguishing feature common to most American narratives.

The plot of *Breaking Bad* echoes that of tragedy because of its tragic hero, Walter White, who isolates himself from the rest of society, on the one hand, for the nature of his criminal activities, but on the other hand, for his own defiance over himself, his hubris, giving way to his alter ego Heisenberg, a man equally feared and admired who takes control over Walter White's tame personality. Despite many opportunities to abandon his criminal associations, he gets more and more infatuated with power and control, as well as the fear he can imprint on others around him. According to Christopher Booker, there are two types of tragic characters: those who are "the malevolent author[s] of other people's sufferings" and those who are mere victims of "[their] own folly" (2014: 182). Walter White seems to fall under a category

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<sup>20</sup> Walter and Jesse's relationship will be discussed in more detail below. The important fact to bear in mind is that they share an unstable partnership from the start, something that will affect them both professionally and personally.

that encompasses both, which causes him to become darker and darker by claiming innocent lives, by overthrowing those who act as his opposing forces and finally by succumbing to his own tragic undoing.

*Breaking Bad* is a unique case in the fertile world of contemporary psychopaths. First of all, the narrative of the series is extraordinarily complex and woven in such a way as to provide very clear season narrative arcs as well as a broader arc that traverses the whole structure of the series. Unlike those discussed so far, such as *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Dexter* and to a certain extent even *House of Cards*, *Breaking Bad* is all about change and transformation. Drawing upon Joseph Campbell's monomythic structure of the hero's journey, Vince Gilligan turned this journey on its head and told the story of the making of a villain: "The in-between moments really are the story in *Breaking Bad* – the moments of metamorphosis, of a guy transforming from a good, law-abiding citizen to a drug kingpin. It is the story of metamorphosis, and metamorphosis in real life is slow." (Vince Gilligan, quoted in Sepinwall, 2013: 351) The slowness with which change takes effect is shown in decisive moments that present a choice of often very dubious moral contours to the protagonist, progressively shaping the greatest and most complex villain in television history so far.

A reversed Midas, Walter White's power is to destroy everything he touches, to affect the lives of those around him in the most negative way. His alter ego Heisenberg derives his name from the German physicist Werner Heisenberg, whose Uncertainty Principle, simply put, deviates from the deterministic approach to scientific knowledge, stating that the future is impossible to predict because the present reality is unstable (Furuta, 2012) and, stating the obvious, uncertain, therefore allowing for deviation in scientific patterns.

By this reckoning, Walt hasn't taken the name Heisenberg as a way of giving props to a man he idolizes, Walt has taken the name of the principle he seeks to exemplify. He's taken the name of the metaphysical truth he now embraces and embodies because Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle opens to him the possibility that he wasn't destined to be bad. Heisenberg allows Walt to believe that he *chose* to break bad and that he can *choose* to be good again. In the absence of a soul, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle opens up to Walt the possibility for redemption. (Murphy, 2013: 23)

Walt's conscious choice to be bad is what makes him a villain. He becomes so gradually, through a series of bad decisions and wrong turns that provoke a chain reaction of colossal proportions. However, there is one single moment that defines Walter White's evil path, for it is the moment that will alter his life and others' around him forever and that is the instant he chooses to start cooking methamphetamine. The first episode is crucial in defining not only the premise of the series, but also the adjacent philosophy to Walt's behaviour, once more taking into account Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and its implications in quantum physics: "According to quantum mechanics, the more precisely the position (momentum) of a particle is given, the less precisely can one say what its momentum (position) is."<sup>21</sup> Because Walter White seems to be the most harmless man on Earth, the most passive, non-threatening and tame protagonist, with several characters at different times stating that he "does not have *it* in him", it is impossible to predict what the outcome will be once he decides to cross the imaginary frontier between good and evil.

What moves Walt tantalizes us as it becomes more depraved and less comprehensible. "Didn't think your old man had it in him" takes on new meaning. Watching Macbeth and Walter White do as they please, part of us wants what they have inside them and part of us fears we already do. (Bossert, 2013: 77)

With a mixture of admiration and disgust, Walt's trajectory is followed closely by the viewer, who commits to the flawed nature of a protagonist that goes from a sympathetic man to a repulsive monster. Notwithstanding, the more cruel and unexpected Walt's behaviour is, the more entertaining the experience and the more engaged the viewer becomes.

Walter White holds two jobs to make ends meet: he is simultaneously a chemistry high school teacher and an employee at a car wash. He lives under the thumb of his overbearing wife, Skyler, and is permanently emasculated and diminished by both his wife and his brother-in-law, DEA agent Hank Schrader, as well as by his boss at the car wash. In addition, he has witnessed his career as a reputed scientist being frustrated as his partners triumphed in the world of scientific investigation. To

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<sup>21</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The Uncertainty Principle": <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qt-uncertainty/> (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2016).



complicate things further, Walt has a son, Walter Jr, with cerebral palsy and another baby on the way. As the series begins he turns 50, a milestone in his unfulfilled life, a moment that triggers his need to act. Plus, on the first episode he finds out he has terminal lung cancer, a realisation that will push him over the edge. The reasons for his wake-up call become evident as, later in the series, Walt explains to a psychiatrist why he allegedly ran away from his family, part of a ploy he makes up after having been held captive by a drug dealer:

Doctor, my wife is seven months pregnant with a baby we didn't intend. My 15 year-old son has cerebral palsy. I am an extremely over-qualified high school chemistry teacher. When I can work I make \$43,700 per year. I have watched all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable... and within 18 months, I will be dead. And you ask why I ran? (*Breaking Bad*, 2:03 "Bit by a Dead Bee")<sup>22</sup>

Similarly to Tony Soprano's recognition that he has come in at the end, Walt realises that his life has passed him by. He is nowhere near to where he wanted to be, he is a failure both professionally and personally. His only interest seems to be chemistry and he tries to pass on this passion to his students who, as their typical teenage cynicism dictates, do not remotely care.

In fact, it is in one of his classes at school that Walt explains to his students the nature of chemical transformation, a process that can also be applied metaphorically to the structure of *Breaking Bad* itself:

Well, technically chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change. Now just... just think about this. Electrons. They change their energy levels. Molecules. Molecules change their bonds. Elements. They combine and change into compounds. Well, that's... That's all of life, right? I mean, it's just... It's the constant, it's the cycle. It's solution, dissolution, just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. (1:01 "Pilot")

Growth, decay and transformation. The first two seasons can be seen as Walter White's growth into someone he does not feel ashamed to be by adopting the persona

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<sup>22</sup> From this point on, all *Breaking Bad*'s quotes shall be referenced by the numbers of the season and the episode, followed by its title.

of Heisenberg and becoming empowered by his role as a drug manufacturer and a man who will do whatever it takes to survive and, allegedly, provide for his family. The third season is when the process of decay takes over Walt. He is still in denial as to the true nature of his evil proclivities and starts admitting defeat, his cancer having gone into remission, thus making him seemingly lose momentum and purpose. This is also when he begins to realise the negative impact of his choices on others and that the justification for his illegal activities no longer makes sense as he is confronted with his wife moving out and taking the children, after realising that Walt has been lying to her for a long time. He even makes a decision to quit the drug business, but it does not take long before he realises that that is the drive he needs to feel alive. After coming to that conclusion, the (final) transformation ensues in the fourth and fifth seasons, particularly in the last one. Heisenberg is now more powerful than Walter White, a Mr Hyde who has finally taken control of the feeble Dr Jekyll.

The fourth season ends with the apotheosis of his metamorphosis, from harmless family man to evil drug kingpin. After killing his competitor and the greatest threat to his existence to date, he tells his wife not that the family is safe but that he has won (4:13 "Face Off"), in a boastful demonstration of ego, finally conquering the omnipotent place of the villain he envisioned himself to be. The viewer also finally realises that he will do whatever it takes to assert his power over others, including poisoning a child. It is this moment that shows how committed Walt is to adopt his alter ego as his true self: "(...) it is as if part of them is reluctant to commit the irrevocable act which another part of them has come to desire: as if, right from the start, the tragic hero or heroine is a 'divided self', one part of their personality striving against another." (Booker, 2014: 175) If, until this moment, there were still two Walter Whites, there is little doubt that the choice he makes here is a defining one in the final characterisation of the monster that has been towering over from the start.

In the classic opposition of nature versus nurture, one may be inclined to think that Walt *became* bad because of a series of wrong (however wilful) choices in the face of inevitable circumstances that continually escalated from his first decision to join the drug business. However, his inclination for evil might have been merely dormant, waiting for an opportunity to flourish, preparing for something that would trigger Heisenberg into existence. By becoming a criminal, Walt is able to demonstrate his

cunning intellectual skills, enjoying living under the police radar, toying with authority and law, which in turn only invests him with greater hubris, isolating him more and more from the world. In the first season, after Skyler and Walt have sex in the car at Walt's school, after a meeting with the DEA and while parked next to a police car, the nature of this thrill becomes clear:

SKYLER: Where did that come from? And why was it so damn good?

WALTER: Because it was illegal.

(1:07 "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal")

From a series of small misdemeanours, such as setting a particularly obnoxious man's car on fire or punching a bully for making fun of his son, it is clear that Walt derives great pleasure from demonstrations of power and force, whether by physical abuse or simply by proving intellectually superior to others.

One may sum up by saying that, physically, morally and psychologically, the monster in storytelling thus represents everything in human nature which is somehow twisted or less than perfect. Above all, and it is the supreme characteristic of every monster who has ever been portrayed in a story, he or she is egocentric. The monster is heartless; totally unable to feel for others, although this may sometimes be disguised beneath a deceptively charming, kindly or solicitous exterior; its only real concern is to look after its own interests, at the expense of everyone else in the world. (Booker, 2014: 33)

Like any villain, Walter White is a vain and arrogant man who considers Heisenberg his most perfect creation, taking great pride in the obeying monster to which all must pledge their allegiance. It soon becomes clear that behind the Heisenberg façade is Walt's true nature.

This seeming duplicity, akin to the two Tony Sopranos and Dexter's Dark Passenger, however, is not something Walt wishes to be able to control. Control in his life comes under the guise of control over others, a domination that requires him to engage in violent behaviour and morally questionable acts. Curiously, it is in one of his chemistry classes that he advances the theory of the double that makes him, at first, be merely curious as to how far he can go, and then too attracted to the abyss within himself to turn back:

Well, the concept here being that just as your left hand and your right hand are mirror images of one another, right, identical and yet opposite, well, so, too, organic compounds can exist as mirror-image forms of one another down at the molecular level. But although they may look the same, they don't always behave the same. (...) So chiral, chirality, mirrored images, right? Active, inactive, good, bad. (1:02 "Cat's in the Bag...")

Just like in the myth of Narcissus, Walter becomes infatuated with his own reflection and is seen to lose all lust for life whenever he needs to keep Heisenberg hidden. This evident narcissism implies a personality disorder that culminates in the obsession over one's self and complete disregard for others. While at first Walt still plays with his mirror image, curious to test his own limits and, to a certain extent, still shaping his alter ego, once he decides to unleash Heisenberg it becomes clear that his is not a destiny unlike the one of Henry Jekyll.

The need for Walter White to be recognised and admired as Heisenberg brushes against his narcissistic traits as he goes to great lengths for people to acknowledge his authority. In the fifth season episode, conveniently entitled "Say My Name", Walt forces a drug dealer to voice the name Heisenberg, thus stating his authority. He is proud of what he has achieved, proud of the blue meth that is his signature mark and that no one must dare copy and, above all, proud of the empire he has put together, which ironically becomes his life's greatest work:

He creates the artifice of a powerful and respected villain under the Heisenberg moniker emblematically tied to the black hat, with a feared street reputation, his demand that adversaries say his name, and even a *narcocorrido* ballad celebrating his mythic exploits, but long-term viewers recognize Heisenberg as a shallow put-on rather than an authentically awe-inspiring figure. (Mittell, 2015: 155)

No matter how seemingly shallow that adopted persona may be it is still the expression of a very dangerous inner drive and a powerful force to be reckoned with. Because, as the series begins, he lacks control in his life, everything he does is to regain that sense of control through choices and rationalisations, however wrong, to make up for one fatal mistake that he feels has deeply dictated everything that has happened to him since that moment. Something only explained in the closing episodes of the series

is that Walt has been fuelling a strong resentment for years after having sold his share of Gray Matter Technologies, a company he co-founded and whose profits skyrocketed after he left, leaving his associates, Gretchen and Elliott Schwartz, very wealthy in the process. That is also the reason Walt does not take their money when they offer to pay for his cancer treatment. Pride, pure and simple. And that becomes his driving force. With his ego at the helm Walt sets out to prove to himself and others that he can achieve greatness by his own means.

Early in the series, he tells a distressed family: "Sometimes I feel like I never actually make any of my own choices, I mean, my entire life, it just seems I never... you know, had a real say about any of it. This last one, cancer, all I have left is how I choose to approach this." (1:05 "Gray Matter") The weakness and fear Walter White complains about are the result of an unfulfilled and frustrated life where he feels he is permanently being jostled by those around him. All he needs is a choice, and his answer to it, his wilful decision to act and actually make one will revert years and years of submission and turn puppet into puppet master. His lack of control will turn into fierce control over others. According to Chuck Klosterman, "His failure is a desire for control." (2013: 30) Like a villain, by taking control of his life he will appropriate others through coercion and manipulation and destroy their lives in the process:

True villainy has to do with the desire to dominate, to subsume the other within the individual self and that without compunction. The villain would appear to lack empathy, the ability to feel for others, to see themselves as part of a larger whole. The villain uses the world and the people in it from a distance, as pure resource. (Alsford, 2006: 120)

This is what Walt does, who he is at his core. The eternal reasoning that he does what he does to provide for and protect his family becomes nothing more than empty words as even his family is dragged into the abyss he has created. By the end of the series, when a desperate Walter White, first shouting and then quietly whispering, says "We're a family" (5:14 "Ozymandias"), it marks the realisation that he has lost everything he claimed to have been fighting for. He finally sees the terror on his wife and son's eyes as they pull away from him, from the monster he has at last become.

The point about the heroes and heroines of Tragedy is that they end up utterly alone (...), completely cut off from the rest of society. They have been drawn by some part of themselves into a course of action which is fundamentally selfish, putting some egocentric desire above every other consideration, isolating them both from reality and from other people. (...) gradually the truth of what they are doing begins to dawn on others. Those around them begin to constellate in opposition. The hero and heroine, having first set themselves against others, we now see the rest of society gradually setting itself against them. (Booker, 2014: 179-80)

As discussed above, Walter White's transformation takes place gradually and there are some pivotal scenes in *Breaking Bad* that are decisive in the making of the villain Heisenberg. Already disregarding the inciting incident, in which Walt makes the decision to cook meth, early in the first season he is confronted with what seems to be the first of many unavoidable acts: in order to protect his family and his own life, he must kill a drug dealer, Krazy-8. At first he finds every reason not to. After all, Walt is not initially a bad man, he rather believes he is forced under a series of circumstances to fend for himself and thus engage in murder. But he manages to convince himself that it is not murder if it is self-defence. Before doing the deed, Walt draws a list of pros and cons, a realistic barometer that will never again cross his mind from that point onwards. On the side of the pros, entitled "Let him live", he writes: "It's the moral thing to do; Judeo-Christian principles; you are not a murderer; Sanctity of life; He may listen to reason; Post-traumatic stress; Won't be able to live with yourself; Murder is wrong!" On the other side, entitled "Kill him", he simply writes: "He'll kill your entire family if you let him go." (1:03 "... And the Bag's in the River") This type of reasoning, at least until Walt lets go of his inhibitions as a villain, is the mark of the man of science, a man who needs to legitimise his position in the world by convincing himself and others that there is a strong reason subjacent to any kind of wrongdoing:

(...) Walt fancies himself a businessman making rational, albeit illegal, decisions in order to earn his living. He is none of these things, of course – few things Walter White does once he decides to cook meth are truly rational – but he believes he can operate in the criminal world and still retain a semblance of morality. (San Juan, 2013: 28)

Walt struggles with this for a long time and only when he is about to cave in and release Krazy-8 does he realise that his captive intends to kill him with a broken piece of glass. Only in the face of this realisation, does Walt finally resort to murder:

Throughout the series, we watch Walt convince himself that various immoral decisions are the right thing to do, given a lack of alternatives, leading to a descent into monstrous behavior that is always presented as reasonable within Walt's own self-justification and immediate context. (Mittell, 2015: 155)

Throughout the same episode there are flashbacks to a time when Walt was still an academic on the verge of a promising scientific career, where he and his colleague and lover Gretchen are seen attempting to determine the elements that compose the human body. Their calculations are superimposed on images of Walt and Jesse cleaning up the pulp that is now one of the drug dealers they have killed. And, although Walt says "There's got to be more to a human being than that", referring to some elements that they might have overlooked in their calculations, it also metaphorically means that there is a part of the human being that cannot be accounted for. That part, suggests Gretchen, could be the soul. Walt, a very pragmatic man, disregards it immediately, saying "There is nothing but chemistry here" (1:03 "... And the Bag's in the River"), a remark that, at the end of the episode, after Walt has killed Krazy-8, might also mean that he is the one without a soul, without a conscience to guide him through the moral wilderness he is about to face.

Not only does the soul bring with it the notion of responsibility or culpability for one's actions, it brings with it all the other notions that go along with it: guilt, pride, and the one drive that Walt seems to wrestle with in his new career as a meth manufacturer – that is, the desire for a clean conscience, relief from the guilt he feels for his actions. In a word: redemption. (Murphy, 2013: 17)

Such an attempt at redemption, if there is one, comes much later in the series, when Walt is finally cornered and the great Heisenberg about to be brought to justice by his brother-in-law. As he witnesses his brother-in-law's death, he comes to the dire realisation that all is lost, for he has failed to protect even his family. In an unexpected

turn of events (a characteristic signature of *Breaking Bad*), Walt, unable to save Hank from being killed by the men he had hired to kill Jesse, and thirsty for revenge, hands Jesse over, like a heifer to the slaughter.<sup>23</sup>

If Walter White seems to be a reluctant villain at first, merely entertaining the notion that he does bad things because he is compelled to, it is clear that he gets an unusual thrill from engaging in psychopathic behaviour, a thrill that his ordinary life does not give him. The first episode ends with his renewed sexual vigour after he has initiated his life as a criminal, a decision that has triggered his inner monster. Skyler even asks “Walt, is that you?” (1:01 “Pilot”), evidencing the duplicity of the character. It is only later in the season that Heisenberg is born, when Walt decides to shave his head (also a consequence of his chemotherapy sessions), put on a black pork pie hat and confront the drug kingpin Tuco.

If the first season was about setting the stage for Walter’s transformation and giving us the tools we need to understand what truly drives him, the second season is about Walt making the final decision to truly break bad. This is about his choice to be a villain, even if he doesn’t acknowledge it at the time. He could have left the business after things went bad with Tuco. He could have found another means to pay for his treatment. He could have been truthful with his family. He could have saved that young woman’s life.<sup>24</sup>

Instead, he chose Heisenberg. (San Juan, 2013: 32)

In the fourth season, when the family is finally breaking apart and his son is demonising his mother, Walt pulls all responsibility to himself: “Listen, what is going on with me is not about some disease. It’s about choices. Choices that I have made. Choices I stand by.” (4:06 “Cornered”) And this is also what he tells Skyler when their lives are in danger: “I have lived under the threat of death for a year now. And because of that, I’ve made choices. Listen to me. I alone should suffer the consequences of those choices, no one else. And those consequences... they’re coming.” (4:12 “End Times”) Again, bearing in mind Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, his choices will determine who he is and not the other way around. As Aristotle stated, “We are what we repeatedly do”. But this responsibility is also a matter of the pride and vanity of his

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<sup>23</sup> Further on it shall be discussed how Walt tries to revert this situation by saving Jesse, a redemptive gesture nonetheless.

<sup>24</sup> Jesse’s girlfriend Jane, whose death will be analysed below.



narcissistic personality, a trait that will make him push Hank in his direction, because he wants credit for everything he has accomplished, good and bad. And, as stated above, this final act of hubris will precipitate the end of everything Walt holds dear.

It should be reminded that Walter White is a dying man. Above all, he is grappling with his own mortality. But the cancer seems to give him purpose and drive, paradoxically, a reason to live. Only in the face of death does Walt choose to act. After he gets the good news about his cancer being in remission, he is not happy or relieved, instead, he is frustrated, as if being deprived of all motivation. After a vain attempt to quit the drug business, he turns to home improvement but soon feels bored, for he cannot go back to the life he had before. It is when he runs into a junkie who is buying supplies to cook meth that he again feels the pull of Heisenberg. “Stay out of my territory” (2:10 “Over”), he says. By claiming back what is his, he feels empowered again, with the sense of control returning to his life:

Because their emotional states are so shallow, many psychopaths are driven by short-term rewards and engage in thrill-seeking behavior such as gambling, theft, or physical risk-taking without fear of the consequences. However, the emotional rush that comes from these thrills is limited and rarely lasts long, resulting in increasingly risky behavior to regain that fleeting excitement. (DeFife, 2010: 9)

The thrill of being someone else, of being a feared and, to a certain extent, a respected villain, is so great that Walt even chooses to conduct a deal with Gus Fring instead of being present for his daughter’s birth. As a result of his cancer’s remission, surgery becomes a possibility. But, accepting to undergo surgery means he needs more money. Perhaps he even subjects himself to the operation because it is a devious way to legitimise his illegal endeavour. Rationally, his survival is the best justification to run such a risk. And it is this latest effort in the drug world that leads him to Gus.

Gustavo Fring is a successful businessman, highly respected in the community but whom, nonetheless, is an industrial-scale methamphetamine dealer. He becomes Walt’s fiercest adversary until also falling victim to Heisenberg’s fury. At first, Walt is seen to admire Gus, both men hide in plain sight, both are ruthless and ambitious, and Walt even enjoys some prosperity when he starts working for Gus. He has his own lab and a loyal and talented chemist by his side, Gale Boetticher. But he soon discovers

that Gus intends to get rid of him as soon as Gale learns how to cook Walter's blue meth. And this makes Walt take action and have his partner, Jesse Pinkman, kill Gale. This decision to kill an innocent man<sup>25</sup> comes at great price. But it is then that Walt's transformation gains its final momentum.

As stated above, the second constant in *Breaking Bad* is Walter White's relationship with Jesse Pinkman, a dynamic that will also be affected by change and whose importance sets the emotional axis of the series. In the very first episode, to get some excitement in his life, as suggested by his brother-in-law Hank, Walt joins the DEA on a meth lab bust. As he is waiting in the car, a young man comes running out of the window. Recognising him as Jesse Pinkman, one of his former students, Walt makes the decision that will forever change his life (and everyone else's) by blackmailing Jesse into cooking methamphetamine with him. Although this is the first of many manipulative schemes to get Jesse's loyalty, Walt first establishes a relationship of dependency with him. He needs him, not only to help him cook, but mainly to help him sell the product. Unaware that Walt has cancer and unsure about his motivations, Jesse questions why this pathetically benevolent man has suddenly decided to start breaking the law in such an extreme way:

JESSE: Tell me why you're doing this. Seriously.

WALTER: Why do you do it?

JESSE: Money, mainly.

WALTER: There you go.

JESSE: Nah, come on, man. Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, all of a sudden at age, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad?

WALTER: I'm 50.

JESSE: It's weird, is all. Okay? It doesn't compute. Listen, if you've gone crazy or something, I mean, if you've gone crazy or depressed, I'm just saying. That's something I need to know about. Okay? I mean, that affects me.

WALTER: I am awake.

(1:01 "Pilot")

Walt's being awake is still somehow meaningless at this point. It could be that the cancer acted as a wake-up call pushing him to act, or it might mean, as it soon

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<sup>25</sup> However involved Gale was in Gus's business, he is presented as an innocent man, a vegetarian, a plant lover, an enthusiast for Walt Whitman's poetry and a brilliant chemist who would have never hurt anyone and whom even Walt had come to admire.

becomes clear, that something inside him has indeed awoken, something evil that had been bottled up within for many years. What Jesse does not know is that Walt sees this decision as an opportunity to make up for the control he had lost since he walked away from Gray Matter Technologies.

But Walt also acts as a father figure to Jesse. Being a junkie and a small-time crook, Jesse has been rejected by his parents, who have given up on him after many failed attempts at rehab, rejected by the school system for being a slacker and even left out of the business he was conducting because of his partner having been caught by the DEA. At one point, he even tries to get a job, an honest way to make a living, but he just does not seem to have any real options. So, when Walt comes along and despite his reluctance, there is some part of Jesse that sees him as a life-saver. And although, at times, Walt is seen to care deeply for Jesse, that caring is only inasmuch as it does not get in the way of Walt's own agenda. He sees Jesse as his subordinate, someone he can easily manipulate and use for his own profit.

JESSE: We agreed, fifty-fifty partners.

WALT: Partners in what? What exactly do you do here? I've been meaning to ask, because I'm the producer, right? I cook. But from what I can tell, you are just a drug addict. You are a pathetic junkie, too stupid to understand and follow simple rudimentary instructions.

(2:04 "Down")

This perspective is also put forward by Eric San Juan when he states:

As much as these two attempt to operate as partners in crime, it is clear from the start that Walt is in charge and that Jesse, despite being the one with drug dealing experience, is initially only along for the ride. (...) Walt emotionally abuses him. He takes his frustrations out on him, demeans him, demoralizes him. He protects him, too, yes, but you get the sense it's not out of altruism. Instead, it's about something Walt has desperately lacked in his life: control. Now able to control something, now actually having someone he can order around, Walter takes full advantage of Jesse's weakness. (2013: 24)

Walt is often seen to show more love for Jesse than for his own flesh and blood. However, he is not a role model, not even for his real son, Walter Jr, who nevertheless looks up to him, particularly as he is battling cancer, even calling him his hero: "He's a

great father, a great teacher. He knows like everything there is to know about chemistry. He's patient with you, and he's always there for you. He's just decent. And he always does the right thing. And that's how he teaches me to be." (2:13 "ABQ") Nevertheless, his son is more often seen admiring his uncle Hank's law enforcement triumphs while Walt is pathetically side-tracked by his brother-in-law's confidence. When Walter Jr is in trouble, he calls his uncle instead of his father and he even prefers to be called Flynn instead of his given name.

Walt's relationship with his son is far from healthy. First and foremost it is based on constant lying, for Walt is never completely honest with him. He forces him to drink at a party to prove his authority and manliness and buys him an expensive sports car to get in his favour. Even when it seems he is reaching out to Walter Jr he does so only to correct some wrong he has done before. The only moment he is apparently truthful to his son (before the end scene when Walter Jr has learned his father is nothing but a monster), causing him to see his father as someone real for the first time, is when, later in the fourth season, after Walt has driven Jesse away, he breaks down in front of his son. He admits his guilt and responsibility, which make him vulnerable. This vulnerability appears to Walter Jr as something real as opposed to the tough façade he has been putting on ever since he found out about the cancer, proudly driving his family away. But even in this heart-breaking moment between father and son, Walt still stumbles over by calling him Jesse.

On the one hand, Jesse brings out the worst in Walter, with some of the cruellest things he does being directed towards Jesse, but on the other hand, he is the one who still appeals to Walt's sense of humanity, a quality that Walt acknowledges in the closing moments of the series as he saves Jesse's life. All along, it is Jesse who feels morally compromised with the choices they have been forced to make to stay ahead in the game. He understands that there is no possible reasoning to justify placing innocents in harm's way. He may not choose to turn his life around, but deep down he acknowledges who he is:

JESSE: You either run from things or you face them, Mr. White.

WALT: What exactly does that mean?

JESSE: I learned it in rehab. It's all about accepting who you really are. I accept who I am.

WALT: And who are you?  
JESSE: I'm the bad guy.  
(3:01 "No Mas")

While Jesse is able to admit responsibility for who he is, a plain evildoer, Walt tells his lawyer Saul Goodman that he "can't be the bad guy" (3:02 "Caballo Sin Nombre"). For him it is crucial to have a reason, even if that reason is a shameful lie. Engaging in evil for evil's sake is something he is not yet ready to admit.

It is only in the fourth season that things seem to be getting out of Walt's control, but, as stated above, he soon regains that control in the final stages of his transformation. Recovering the idea of the fatal flaw that brings the hero down, a blindness that comes from his commitment to the dark side, the events before Walt establishes himself as a fearless villain seem to accompany a frustration period. According to Christopher Booker, this is characteristic of the tragic hero's journey:

Each of these stories [the Myth of Icarus, *Faust*, *Macbeth*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Lolita*] shows a hero being tempted or impelled into a course of action which is in some way dark or forbidden. For a time, as the hero embarks on a course, he enjoys almost unbelievable, dreamlike success. But somehow it is in the nature of the course he is pursuing that he cannot achieve satisfaction. His mood is increasingly chequered by a sense of frustration. As he still pursues the dream, vainly trying to make his position secure, he begins to feel more and more threatened – things have got out of control. The original dream has soured into a nightmare where everything is going more and more wrong. This eventually culminates in the hero's violent destruction. (2014: 155)

Therefore, by his apparent weakness and vulnerability, Walt is drawn to a state of alienation that drives a wedge between him and others, turning that vulnerability into an excess of pride and confidence which places him in a position of power. But, as in the example of *House of Cards*, balancing this power is a difficult undertaking. By the end of *Breaking Bad*, Walt's house of cards has collapsed. However, he is not brought down by external forces or punished by anyone but himself:

So disintegrated are they, inwardly and outwardly; so far has their original dream proved an illusion; so far off the rails has their blinkered vision taken them; so horrified has part of them become at what the dark component in

their personality has led them to that, in self-disgust, they turn their violence suicidally on themselves. (Booker, 2014: 225)

Because he is a dying man, destroyed by cancer and with nothing else to lose, he *chooses* to sacrifice himself and save Jesse's life in the process. Initially intending to kill him along with the neo-Nazis who stole his money, Walt has one final attempt at redemption, freeing Jesse once and for all. This is Walt's only selfless act, but it is nonetheless a tainted and dubious redemption. He *is* dying. His own destruction this late in the game will still serve his selfish motives, for it implies that the great Heisenberg will never be brought to justice. Walt's ultimate gesture to save Jesse from his captors is not blissfully welcomed but rather too little too late. At the same time, given the opportunity, Jesse does not kill him, maybe because that is what Walt wants, and finally finds the courage to stand up to him, freeing himself from all the manipulation and coercion.

Mr. White dismantles everything Jesse holds dear and leaves him an empty shell. Walt adopted a son and promptly remade him in his own image: numb, barren, dissatisfied, and only able to clutch at small victories bereft of morality. It's not his goal, not consciously, but it is the natural result of being adopted by Walter White. (San Juan, 2013: 26)

Jesse's life has already been destroyed, as well as everyone else who has crossed Walt's path, in particular the family he so vehemently swore to be protecting: Hank has been killed after having suffered immensely, Skyler is a faint shadow of the woman she used to be, Walter Jr wishes him dead. He does love Jesse and his family but, like any villain, he loves himself more.

Because his loyalty to Jesse is merely circumstantial, he often goes head-to-head with him to assert his power, manipulating him into doing his bidding. He does look out for him and saves his life more than once, but he does so with the complete awareness that his life is on the line too. When, at the end of the second season, Walt is talking to the father of Jesse's girlfriend Jane (without knowing he is her father) about the importance of family, Walt thinks about Jesse as one of his own, a caring thought which makes him go back to Jesse's house to make him see reason. But, as he tries to wake him up from his heroin-induced stupor, Jane, sleeping next to him, rolls

on her back and chokes on her own vomit. Walt's initial gesture is to go and help, but he soon realises that by not helping he can get Jesse back, both because he cares and because he knows he can easily manipulate him. However, by letting Jane die and, to a certain extent, by choosing not to act, it is as if he kills her, "(...) it's the fact that he *could* save her life but *doesn't* that is so morally repulsive." (Littmann, 2013: 166) Just as Mike Alsford states:

The old adage 'all that is required for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing' would seem to express a fundamental truth about the nature of our world. Sadly, it would seem, and all things being equal, humanity does tend towards the dark side. We fear punishment and censure but more often than not it is law rather than conscience that keeps us in check. Fear of getting caught is frequently what keeps our baser instincts under control. (2006: 72)

Walt's inaction is a reflection of a seized opportunity. By letting Jane die, he pushes Jesse further and further into the dark recesses of his weak personality.

When Gus asks him why he has chosen to have a junkie as a partner, Walt replies: "Because he does what I say. Because I can trust him." (2:11 "Mandala") And later, the act that defines Walt's final transformation into the villain Heisenberg is once more a direct threat to Jesse as he poisons his girlfriend's son Brock and uses this to convince Jesse that it was Gus who did it and that they need to destroy him together, getting him on his side once again. In their confrontation, when Walt asks why he would poison a child, Jesse replies: "To get back at me. Because I'm helping Gus... and this is your way of ripping my heart out before you're dead and gone. Just admit it. Admit what you did." (4:12 "End Times") This is one of the many moments when Jesse confronts Walt's egocentricity and seems to see him for what he truly stands for. And even though these confrontations resonate within Walt, Jesse ends up once more trying to validate himself through his relationship with Walt. When Walt asks Jesse to come back promising to make him his partner, Jesse voices all the frustration every character at one point or another has felt as a result of their encounter with Walter White:

I am not turning down the money. I am turning down you. You get it? I want nothing to do with you. Ever since I met you... everything I've ever cared about... is gone. Ruined, turned to shit... dead, ever since I hooked up with

the great Heisenberg. I have never been more alone. I have nothing! No one! All right? It's all gone! Get it? No. No, no. Why? Why would you get it? What do you even care, as long as you get what you want? Right? You don't give a shit about me. You said I was no good. I'm nothing!" (3:07 "One Minute")

In a similar way, in the last conversation they have, Jesse begs Walt to be honest, realising that everything Walt has ever done for him has merely been a part of his scheming and manipulation. He understands Walt is the centre of both of their universes and all he asks is for Walt to tell him what he needs and wants him to do as opposed to pretending to care and surreptitiously leading him to do what he wants. In both of these instances, Walt gains Jesse over by apparently letting his guard down. In the first scene, at the hospital, he tells Jesse his meth is as good as Walt's and in the second scene, during their last conversation, Walt hugs him as he cries, a hug that does not seem to comfort but expose the awkwardness of their relationship. Despite everything Walt has done to him, Jesse always tries to appeal to Walt's sense of humanity, *choosing* to believe he can impact on him, because Jesse has something Walt seems to lack: empathy.

As discussed above regarding *Dexter*, lack of empathy is one of the traits of the psychopath. There is little doubt that Walter White is a fully fledged psychopath, for all his cool and calculating reasoning, his cruel intelligence and clinical precision, his revelling of violence and his invented persona to hide all this:

Sociopathy is no philosophy; instead, it's the result of powerful defense mechanisms that direct rage to the emotionless use of reason, for the purpose of gradually accumulating instrumental power over one's surroundings. The emotions are almost completely suppressed so that the rational mind can better do its job of giving rage the tools needed to gain power. This tends to supply the natural human tendency to empathize with other humans, especially those suffering or those seen as fellow members of a privileged group. And the result then is an extremely unstable person (as in the case of numerous serial killers). (Donhauser, 2013: 106)

The psychopath indulges in his every whim and lives in a permanent state of alienation, disregarding others around unless they are instrumental for his assertion of power. The brain commands the psychopath as a cruel and unscrupulous master, forcing the disconnection between the subject's conscious and unconscious states.



When they first set out, Walt tells Jesse: “This operation is you and me, and I’m the silent partner. (...) No matter what happens, no more bloodshed. No violence.” (1:06 “Crazy Handful of Nothin’”) The wish for no violence to occur is constantly repeated by Walt as things become more complicated. As the casualties pile up Walt always tries to convince Jesse that no one else has to die. His reasoning even goes to the extent of him telling Gus he is not a criminal, of convincing Jesse that they are not murderers, but these are weak excuses for when violence does not seem to fit his purposes. Obviously, as his empire grows, violence becomes Walt’s answer to everything.

This constant denial of who he truly is comes to a halt when he decides to flaunt his blatant behaviour, now fearless of the consequences. Becoming Heisenberg has made him blind and careless as he finally embraces the truth about himself. When Jesse asks him, because of his demonstration of unbridled pride and ambition, if he is in the meth business or the money business, his answer is blunt: “Neither. I’m in the empire business.” (5:06 “Buyout”) Walter White puts on the mask of Heisenberg to unleash his true nature but, as it also becomes clear, he believes himself to be more than he actually is. As with most villains, this blind faith, this hubris, is exactly what makes him dangerous. Skyler, still trying to understand and protect him, says: “You’re not some hardened, criminal, Walt. You are in over your head.” To which he retorts, in one of the series most memorable dialogues:

Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? (...) You know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going in to work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up. Disappears. It ceases to exist without me. No. You clearly don’t know who you’re talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I *am* the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I *am* the one who knocks. (4:06 “Cornered”)

This brilliant delivery sums up the way Walter White sees himself. He has built his alter ego on the fear he can effect on others. If, before the cancer, he lived in fear and paralysed for his inability to act, the cancer shifted that balance in such a way as to make him be an agent of fear, a monster no one can face and live to tell the tale.

Earlier in the series, in class, Walt once more explains how chemistry affects everything, thus shedding some light on the changes he has lately been undergoing:

Chemical reactions involve change on two levels. Matter and energy. When a reaction is gradual, the change in energy is slight. I mean, you don't even notice the reaction is happening. (...) But if a reaction happens quickly, otherwise harmless substances can interact in a way that generates enormous bursts of energy. (...) The faster they [chemical reactants] undergo change, the more violent the explosion. (1:06 "Crazy Handful of Nothin'")

These reactions are the ignition to the explosion about to take place. By the end, past all the lying and deceiving, after losing his family and everything he supposedly held dear, once again succumbing to cancer, a grief-stricken Walt finally stands up to who he truly is:

WALT: Skyler. All the things that I did, you need to understand...

SKYLER: If I have to hear one more time that you did this for the family...

WALT: I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really... I was alive. (5:16 "Felina")

Once and for all admitting his hubris places him one step further towards redemption. But Walt has diverted so much from the path that he can no longer find his way back.

Walter White dies in the lab after having been wounded by his own machine gun, victim of his own folly, right before the DEA could capture him. Instead of having died from a pathetic thing such as cancer (something he tells his son: "You think I came all this way just to let something as silly as lung cancer take me down?" (5:12 "Rabid Dog")), in the end, and although there is nothing left for him, he takes the fall because he *chooses* to, on his own terms, because the man who accepts his fate is a man who is truly free.

*Breaking Bad*, then, is about the journey of a man who succumbs to his ego, a man who is overtaken by the fatal flaw in his personality. Jesse's realisation that Walter White is an uncontrollable force seems to align with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: "Mr. White, he's the devil. You know, he is... He is smarter than you, he is luckier than you. Whatever... Whatever you think is supposed to happen, I'm telling you, the exact reverse opposite of that is gonna happen, okay?" (5:12 "Rabid Dog")

The outcome of Walter White's actions cannot be predicted. The only certainty is that, as a tragic hero, he will be brought down by his fatal flaw, that which within himself makes him fall short of a hero.

## CONCLUSION

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century the horrors of the world seem to have replaced old values and beliefs. The stunning effect of such horrors has induced society into a coma from which there is no escape but through the acknowledgment that the world keeps spinning around the same battered issues since the dawn of time: violence, evil, kindness, redemption, identity, control, empathy, etc., that is to say, human nature. The archetype of the American hero, forever associated with a certain kind of accepted violence necessary to achieve justice and redemption, has changed too, in order to accommodate new protagonists that reflect contemporary fears and concerns. Psychopaths and murderers exchange places with heroes and achieve a prominent role in modern narratives as they provoke readers and viewers to rethink the categories of *good* and *evil*. This new approach to narratives, without any redemptive qualities, implies that

(...) our world is out of control, pervaded by an evil against which we feel helpless, an evil that affronts us from without in the form of disfigured, bloodthirsty strangers and from within in the form of perverse dreams and desires or nightmare versions of the generation gap – our own children suddenly revealed as alien monstrosities, Rosemary's babies. (Slotkin, 1993: 635)

Fictional works like *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad* or *House of Cards* illustrate contemporary society's lack of faith in its own structure and moral values to accommodate real change. Such change could perhaps be connected to Richard Slotkin's *regeneration through violence*, a deep-rooted acceptance that violence is part of a system that is less than perfect, a system that, as the last few decades have proven, has no obvious positive growth.

Fascination with fallible characters, which are nevertheless strong for their propensity for violence, finds justification in the recognition that these people have always existed. Violence is not new. And neither is violent behaviour. However, shunning that as a thing of the past is the recurring mistake of contemporary society.

Underestimating the changing power of that violence is the thing that keeps the world a dormant place. It is up to the viewer to act on the freedom of his choices in condoning or condemning these new protagonists, whose lives he follows closely in the hopes that they may shed some light on his personal experience. As mentioned before, these fictions are not escapist by nature. More and more the underlying principle of these series is to place the viewer in direct confrontation with apparently established values, such as *right* and *wrong*, *good* and *evil*. Challenge comes from the acceptance to live on a permanent threshold, a limbo that accepts all sets of opposites.

Inhabiting these brave new worlds are protagonists struggling with their inner selves, some even aware that they will not emerge victorious from such an inglorious battle. Their legacy is a wound of overwhelming consequences, a self-imposed gap between them and the world, exalting their wicked nature and villainous qualities.

If man's battle with his inner demons defined *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and their descendants, they also drew a crucial dose of their realism from the tenacity of that battle – the way their characters stubbornly refused to change in any substantive way, despite constantly resolving to do so. (Martin, 2013: 104)

The inability to change brings about a repetition of past mistakes and virtues in a perpetual renewal of the hero's role. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this hero has exchanged places with the villain, as demonstrated by the case of *Breaking Bad's* Walter White. At the end of this narrative, the protagonist is utterly alone, his narcissism and individualism have cornered him in death.

This new protagonist is condemned to an inner journey, nevertheless a quest for his authenticity and place in the world. Man, at once abandoned and rejected, remains within and without himself, a slave to two conflicting natures: the man he *is* and the man he wishes he *had become*.

‘Live,’ Nietzsche says, ‘as though the day were here.’ It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – carries the cross of the redeemer – not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair. (Campbell, 1973: 391)

This deeply individualistic take on contemporary society and values implies an authentic *being in the world*, although more and more beset with self-doubt and existential despair. The identity of this new protagonist is charged with violence, whether revealed in cruel outbursts against others or turned upon himself as a means of self-control. Recognising that he must cross this contemporary wilderness on his own, acknowledging who he is at heart – a criminal, a psychopath, a serial killer, a politician or a drug kingpin –, he knows his choices alone will determine the success or failure of the path he has set himself upon.

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